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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

JANUARY, 1967 VOL. 2, No. 6

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE LIGHT-KILL AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Deep in an uncharted jungle, a mad scientist has found a formula for evil that was quick and deadly, as Solo and Illya seek to find and destroy the monstrous cannibal plants whose prey is human flesh. . . . . . 2 *to* 59

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United Network Command for Law and Enforcement

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THE LIGHT-KILL AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Deep in an uncharted jungle, Solo and Illya come to death grips with THRUSH's new, most lethal weapon, a madness-spawned, all powerful cannibal plant which feeds only on one kind of food—human flesh!

ACT I—INCIDENT OF THE PETRIFIED JUNGLE

THE TWO MEN crept through the jungle quiet, slowing involuntarily, puzzled and infected by the poison of unexplained dread.

Actually, silence is even stranger in a Central American jungle than in noonday Manhattan. The deeper they penetrated this unearthly stillness the more they suffered from the unrelenting intense humidity.

"Something's fouled up, Diego," Don Sayres whispered, feeling as if his voice carried like the crack of a rifle.

"I'm afraid we're lost, Senor Sayres," Diego said.

"Something more significant than that. Where are the monkeys? Where are the birds? This place is deadly quiet."

Sayres stopped walking, held up his hand. A blue-green haze hung over the rotted swamp growth. Distantly above them through a tight-woven vine canopy the sun glittered.

"What sort of compass reading you get, Diego? I have no idea where we are."

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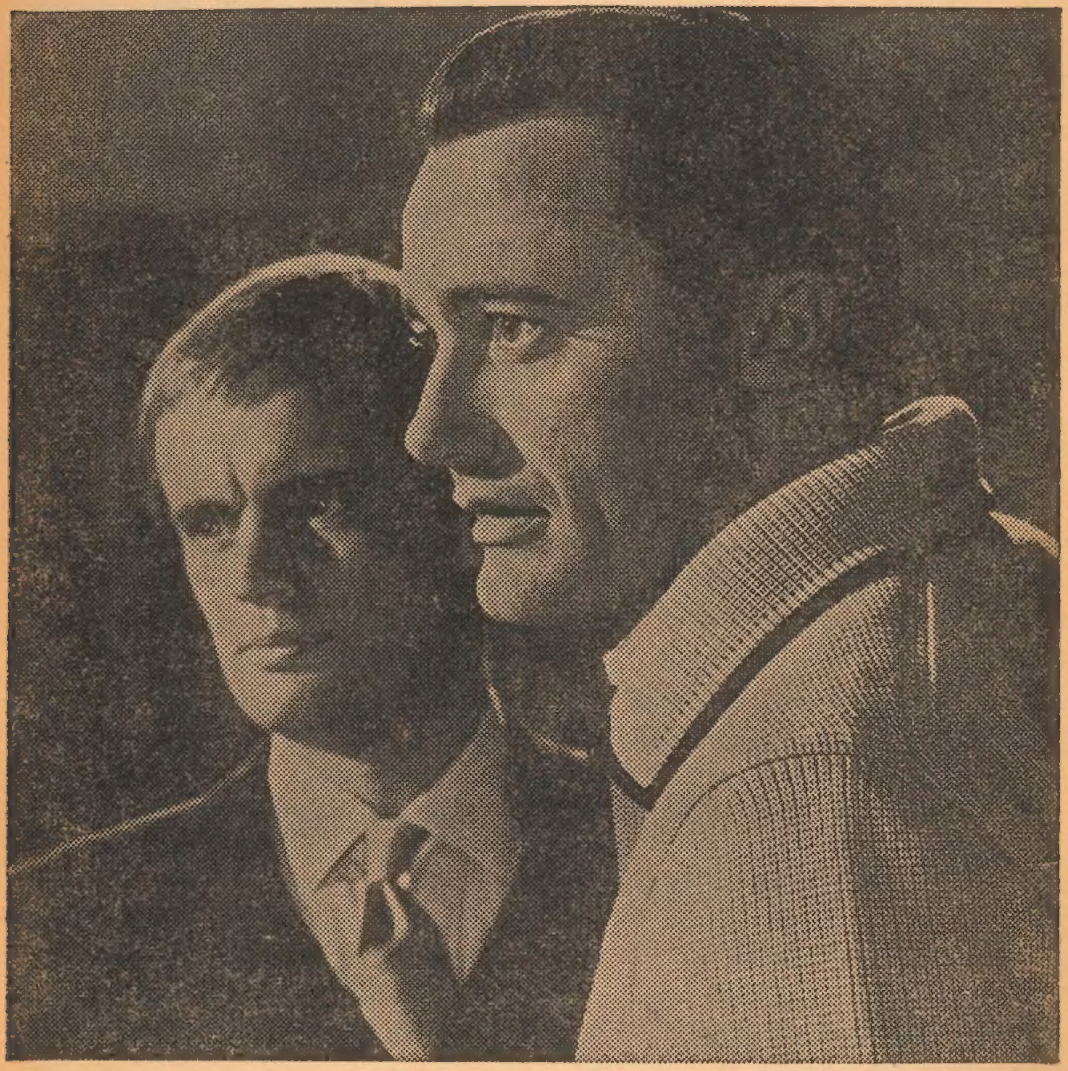
FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN



"The needle whirls," Diego said. "Only this has not changed in the last hour."

"Okay. Forget the compass." Sayres' handsome young face was masked with sweat and anxiety narrowed his eyes. He turned all the way around, not afraid, but deeply concerned. No matter where he looked, there was only matted swamp life, and his own breathing was the loudest sound.

"Look for some kind of high ground. We'll set up."

Diego nodded and hacked his way through ferns, vines and wild lillies with his machete. Finding even a knoll open to the sky was a matter of an hour's search. Diego shinnied up a cabbage palm, searched with his hand shielding his eyes. He found something to his liking and leaped to the muck, nodding.

On a grassy island in the tangled swamp Sayres opened the small kit he'd carried strapped to his back.

Diego Viero watched, awed, as the kit offered up electronic gear like a conjurer's bag.

"It's been a long time I've been away from headquarters," he said. "U.N.C.L.E. had no such gear the last time I was there."

Sayres was too intent upon his work to reply. What unfolded to look like a small radar skeletal proved to be a long range viewer with a breathtaking difference. Sayres adjusted it and when he and Diego studied it the small dial was homed in on a distant area as clearly as across an open plain.

Sayres explained quickly the operation of this viewer to Diego.

"What I want you to do," he said, "is to turn this knob, which moves the scanner on a three-hundred-sixty-degree area. At each turn, fine-tune with this knob, which will home in on given distances as if there were no trees or jungle in the way. Move it slowly. Check it from zero to its ultimate reach; then move on to the next setting."

Diego nodded. "You mind saying what I'm looking for, Senor Sayres?"

Sayres was already setting up a two-way radio transmitter in a pack no larger than the palm of his hand.

"I wish I could tell you," he said. "I think you'll recognize it as quickly as I would. We want to pick up anything that doesn't belong in this jungle, man, woman, building or child. If Dr. Ivey Nesbitt is down here—and I no longer think he is—we'll find him out here, or we won't find him at all. And my bet is we won't find him at all."

"Why have you come so deep in this place if you feel our search is doomed to fail?"

Sayres gave the Spanish-born agent a faint grin. "You have been a long time away from headquarters, Diego. Ours is not to question why. Waverly says a man named Ivey Nesbitt has disappeared. The U.N.C.L.E. computers churn, the facts are sifted, and Waverly tells Solo to assign a man to find Nesbitt and bring him back home. So here we are."

Diego started to speak, but Sayres lifted his hand, silencing him.

He spoke into the miniature microphone. "Open channel six,

please. This is Equator calling Charley, please."

After a moment, Alexander Waverly's crisp accents crackled on a speaker even smaller than the microphone. "Charley here, Equator. Recording systems set. Go ahead with your report, please. Over."

Sayres gave his precise latitude, longitude bearings. "We are now set up for long-view scanning. We will now take a three-hundred-sixty degree reading. If you will hold this channel open, we'll make our report."

He handed the small set to Diego, who held the microphone close to Sayres' lips.

Sayres took over working the long-view scanner. He set for distance, for range, direction, then worked the fine tuner. He worked casually, expecting nothing, making his report lethargically.

Suddenly Sayres swore in startled surprise.

Diego forgot the open channel. He gripped Sayres' arm. "Senor! What is it?"

Sayres shook his head, waving the other agent away. He stared at the small scanner, speaking into the mike, his voice flat with disbelief. "It's a laboratory, sir. At first it looked like a large greenhouse." He gave the reading on the range and distance finder as from his bearing. "This makes even less sense. But here goes. The lab is glass walled. Makes it easy to see inside. In there, the place is equipped like General Electric.

"I don't believe it. There are at least half a dozen people working down there, although there are no other buildings around, and absolutely no roads leading in or out of the clearing. . . . Oh, there's the answer to that, sir. A helicopter. That's how they come and go, all right. And in the lab is plant life, exactly like that growing outside, which makes no sense at all, except that some of the plants are in smallest pots and others are giant-sized. And now everybody down there is running around wildly, like ants in a stirred hill, and—"

Sayres stopped talking when Diego cried out.

Sayres dropped to his knees, turning, radio and scanner forgotten.

Death flew in on a silence even

U.N.C.L.E.

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

more intense than the eerie quiet they'd plodded through all morning.

Sayres stared at Diego. It was as if he were suddenly illumined by a million-watt intensification of sunlight. He straightened convulsively and then crumpled dead to the ground.

Sayres plunged forward, scrambling away from the dead agent and his gear.

It was then he realized that *something* had broken the silence, a sharp hissing sound.

Sayres threw himself into the concealment of a tree, gazing across the knoll and the jungle beyond. The tops of the trees, the high vines, everything had been crisped, burned gray and dead.

Then Sayres saw the beam of light swing across the tops of the trees, leaving petrified ash in its wake.

The beam returned, lower this time.

Sayres held his breath, crouching behind the tree. He no longer deceived himself; this tree was no more protection against that beam of light than a leaf.

He heeled around, crouched low and plunged into the swampy undergrowth. Behind him he heard the hiss as the light burned trees, leaves, vines, searching for him.

He did not stop to look back. He didn't have to, because the light beam reached beyond him. The range was being steadily increased and he saw that they were going to let him run into it.

He flung himself face down into the mud. He thrust his hand into his jacket and brought out a small vial with spray attachment.

Holding the nozzle toward him, Sayres closed his eyes and turned, sitting up. His thumb came down on the sprayer, but it was too late. The light beam struck him, seeming to glance across him.

He stayed a moment in that rigid position as if instantly petrified by that incredible heat. He tottered slightly, and then did not move again. He was dead. . . .

TWO

NAPOLEON SOLO faced the four people about the conference table.

"And that's it," Solo said, scowling. "Sayres' report ends there, abruptly."

Solo was medium tall, slender, with dark brown hair, now mussed. He could have been, at first glance, a doctor, lawyer, advertising man. Despite the conservative cut of his business suit, he didn't belong to the ordinary career world. He was skilled in the strange art of superspying.

"I believe the outcry came from the young Spanish agent," Alexander Waverly said.

Of an age known only to himself and U.N.C.L.E. computers, neither of which were at all com-

municative on the subject, Waverly was the veteran of two world wars, several police engagements, and a dedicated referee in a continuing cold war.

"He must have died first," Waverly said. "What was his name? Oh, yes. Diego. A good man. He'd been down in Central America for some years. Due a transfer. It was his report that first confirmed my suspicions that perhaps Dr. Ivey Nesbitt was down there."

"Sayres must be presumed dead, too," Solo said. Death was a part of his daily life in the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, but each loss of one of his men diminished him by that much, struck him with an anguish he carefully concealed.

"Then the next move is up to us," Illya Kuryakin said. "Somebody killed Don."

Illya stood up. Slender, youthful appearing, with a Slavic face testifying to his ancestry and unruly blond hair showing him too concerned with the business of life and death to care much for grooming. "Don was a personal friend of mine. I'd like the assignment."

"I should have the assignment," April Dancer protested. She had the kind of loveliness that in a less taut moment made business difficult of transacting. You never observed her once without looking back again in pleasure and disbelief. Admiring April was like taking one of those quickie European tours; there wasn't time to appreciate the view.

"If you'll remember, Napoleon," she said, "it was my assignment in the first place. At the last minute Don replaced me."

"There must have been a good reason why you were replaced, April," Mark Slate said in his perfect English diction. He pushed his hand through his matted light-brown hair. "The jungle is no place for a woman, especially when we don't even know what killed those two men. I think I—"

"And I think I've heard enough!" Waverly stood up suddenly. The command room rang with the sound of his voice. "Is this a quiet Monday in some small town fire station? I understand that each of you feels deeply the loss of a man like Sayres. I am not unmindful of the sadness of this situation for all of you. But you are all professional people. You've been here long enough to know assignments are never made on basis of personal involvement."

April, Mark and Illya glanced ruefully at each other.

Waverly said, "Now, if we may get on with the pertinent aspects of this case. Our report pins down the precise location where Sayres set up the scanner and met his death. He reports a large laboratory and gives us its exact location in relation to his position. This is our last contact with Sayres.

"But it gives us a great deal to

work on, more than we have had. And the fact that a jungle laboratory has been so handsomely equipped convinces me that Dr. Ivey Nesbitt is down there. Is that you conclusion, Mr. Solo?"

Solo nodded. "It's worth further investigation. I believe this lab is part of some plan of THRUSH, and I believe that if Dr. Nesbitt is down there that he has gone over to THRUSH."

"We don't know how Diego and Sayres met their death," Waverly mused. "But it is clear that they were being as closely watched as possible. Even when Sayres set up the scanner, the people must have known it through some detection system unknown to us yet."

"I can't understand why Sayres failed to activate his plastic shield," Illya said. He placed a small vial on the table before him. This matched the sprayer Sayres had brought from his pocket in the jungle at the instant he was killed.

Illya touched the nozzle. A faint mist appeared and hardened instantly into an almost invisible shield of plastic.

"Looks like death was instantaneous," Mark Slate said. "We know he had the warning of Diego's outcry. That's there clearly on the tape."

"Exactly," Waverly agreed. "For that reason, Mr. Solo, I suggest you follow up this investigation personally. However, I suggest you make no contacts, even with our own people, except to hire a guide when you reach San Miguel. And I'm sure I hardly need urge you to travel incognito."

THREE

THE SLIGHTLY stooped man who disembarked from the banana boat in the port city of San Miguel bore no resemblance to Napoleon Solo.

He wore a shapeless panama hat, wrinkled white coat and creased white pants. His string tie was awry at the collar of his sweated shirt. He stared at the world over the tops of rimless glasses.

He carried a small pack, a straw suitcase and an oversized butterfly net. He drank *anejo* on the rocks in a waterfront bodega and asked for a guide who might lead him far into the jungles.

The bartender smiled at his other patrons. "And what would a man like you be looking for in that jungle—armed with just a net?"

"I am a hunter of rare species of butterflies and other lepidopterous specimen," Solo said. "I believe the rarest species of all are to be found in your inner jungle regions."

"That's a big net for butterflies," the bartender said.

"I don't want to hurt them."

The bartender grinned slyly. "It's beeg enough to catch girls, Professor."

"I don't want to hurt them, either," Solo said.

The bartender laughed. "You're all right, old fellow. But I don't think you'll find a guide to take you into the jungle. Only recently two men went from this town into the jungle and have not returned. The guides don't even like to go in there now with game hunters. I know they won't want to go with nothing more to protect them than a butterfly net."

"I'm sure that's all the protection we'll need."

"One goes into the jungle, he finds trouble," the bartender said, shaking his head.

Solo shook his grey head and gave him a bland smile. "Perhaps this is true for those who seek trouble, sir. But trouble is the last thing I am looking for."

The bartender's words followed him into the dusty street. "Just pray that trouble isn't the first thing you find, senor, no matter what you are looking for."

Solo walked down the dirt road and stopped before the man sitting in front of the adobe house. The man's name was Carrero and he lived in the house with half a dozen small children and a slovenly half-breed wife underfoot. He shook his head. "I no go in jungle. Something very bad happen."

"I am sure this is just superstition," Solo said.

"Death comes quiet. Silent. Quicker than the strike of a snake. The jungle is burned dry by the touch of this death."

"Butterflies," Solo persisted with that bland smile.

He kept smiling and placing money in a small green stack before the widening eyes of Carrero and family until the anguished man could no longer resist what looked to him like a fortune.

Senora Carerro wept and the children ran out in the potted road, clinging to Carrero's tattered pant legs.

Solo gave the children candy and placed ten dollars in Senora Carrero's trembling hand. "Buy yourself a hat, Senora, and I vow to bring your husband back safely —and with a huge butterfly to wear on your bonnet."

But before they were ten miles into the swamplands, Solo found the shuffling gait of the lepidopterast too slow, and the large net, which caught on every obstruction, a burden and he discarded both.

Carrero regarded him with sick eyes, seeing they were not on the trail of insects after all.

That night the drizzling mists in the rain forests washed out the last traces of dye from Solo's dark brown hair. When he wakened the next morning from his sleeping hammock, he tossed aside the rimless glasses.

Carrero stared at him in sick horror.

Solo winced, knowing the man was seeing a bearded young man in place of a kindly gray elder.

Carrero looked about as if seeking an escape.

"Don't run," Solo warned him. "You are no butterfly hunter. You are here to seek trouble. Bad trouble. I owe you nothing. I do not have to stay."

Solo gazed at him levelly. "If you stay with me, I'll make every effort to protect you. I vowed to your wife I'd return you safely, even if I begin to wonder what it is she prizes about you. If you run, I promise you, you'll never make it back—except in pieces."

Carrero stared at him a moment defiantly, and then lost all defiance. "Senor, I am a simple man. I want no trouble. Please. A simple man."

"Then, let's leave it that way. You take me where I want to go and I'll bring you back."

Carrero rolled his black eyes, and crossed himself three times.

On the third morning Solo stared at the small round object Carrero had puzzedly watched him study often since they entered the jungle.

"We've reached the place I was looking for," Solo said. "Relax."

"How do you know the place if you have never been here?" Carrero asked, shaking his head.

"By this gadget. It was set before I left New York. Not even disturbances that throw off a compass will alter it. The horizontal and the vertical red lines are exactly one on the other. Do you see that?"

Carrero nodded, but he hardly dared look at the small object—undoubtedly witchcraft. He glanced about, seeing nothing except the grassy knoll, like an island in the sea of jungle pressing in upon them.

But Solo had forgotten the frightened guide. He opened his kit and set up a long-view scanner exactly like the one Sayres had used in this place except that it was set as to range and distance to the markings given in Sayres' report.

Solo tuned in the gear. The small viewer showed him nothing but a rectangular area of marshy undergrowth. Every test proved that the settings were right.

Solo swore.

Carrero ventured forward timidly. "What is wrong, Senor?"

"Everything," Solo spoke mostly to himself. "There's no building down there. Nothing."

"Building, Senor? Naturally not. Not here in this jungle."

"Well, there's supposed to be! There's got to be!" Solo spoke ve-

hemently and the guide retreated a step.

He reset the dials, glanced at Carrero. "You want to go with me?"

The guide nodded, eyes wide. "I wish only not to be left alone in this place, even for a minute."

"Then stay close behind me."

"Senor need not worry about this, either. As his shadow is there, so will I be."

They plodded through undergrowth until the red lines of the dial matched again. Solo spent an hour chopping away the high swamp growth.

He felt the emptiness of defeat. According to Sayres' final report, a glass-walled lab had stood only days ago in this place, a cleared area with space for landing a helicopter.

He shook his head. There was no trace of building and it seemed incredible that vines and trees could grow so lush in such a short time.

"No!" He spoke aloud. "There's got to be an answer." He stared at Carrero without really seeing him. "We've got to find it, that's all."

Solo prowled the underbrush a moment. Then he said, "Carrero, you're a jungle man. You could find out where you were by the growth, feed yourself, if you were lost, eh?"

"You think us hopelessly lost, Senor?" Carrero's face twisted.

"No. But I think if these plants are younger, newer, it should show. Do you understand?"

"Young plants, no matter how tall, are more tender than the older. Young plants seldom have the berries that sustain life."

"Now you're thinking, Carrero. That's what I want. You find where these young plants meet older growth. We should be surrounded by it. Mark it all out, and we'll narrow down the area that much."

In less than an hour, Carrero had hacked out a rectangle that could have been the base for a glass-walled laboratory. Inside this area, Solo hacked with machete until he found what he had been sure must remain, the foundation for those walls.

He shouted in his pleasure. Carrero came running. Solo was smiling through his three days beard, sweat and mud.

"Here it is! Here it stood. Look, traces of garbage, food tins, broken glass, inside this foundation footing. We've found our butterflies, Carrero!"

"Si! Si!" Carrero looked around timidly. "We can now go home, no?"

Solo nodded, hardly hearing what the guide said.

He returned to the long-range scanner on the knoll. It was as if he had found the key piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Everything else fell into place.

He found bits of electronic gear to show where Sayres' scanner had

been destroyed. He found bones and teeth that must once have been Diego Viero and after a long search he found shoes with the x-marked identification tags.

He gazed at the tags before he dropped them into his pocket. His face was bleak. Not only had Diego and Sayres been slain, but their bodies and their equipment had been destroyed.

"All right, Carrero," Solo said at last. "Let's go home."

FOUR

THE NIGHT BEFORE they reached the village where Carrero lived, Napoleon Solo stepped back into his stooped, gray-haired person as the naturalist. Carrero watched in disbelief as he dyed his hair, donned rimless glasses.

Carrero spoke hesitantly. "You are a man for whom I have learned great respect, Mr. Solo. You are a very smart man, but more, you are a brave one. I am glad, now that I reach safety, that I accompanied you on this strange trip, even if I went reluctantly."

Solo nodded absently. "Thanks, Carrero. You're a brave man, too."

"No. I am a man who thinks of his wife—fat as she is—and his children. I worry if I do not return alive to them."

"It won't be long now."

"I know. This troubles me. You return now to your disguise. This means that though trouble has ended for Carrero, it is not over for you."

"I'm afraid it hasn't really begun yet," Solo said in that bland tone, peering over his glasses.

At ten the next morning, Solo tottered into the shipping office at the San Miguel docks.

A young man stared at him across the desk. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes. You can." Solo's voice was testy. "Indeed, you'd better. I have been expecting a shipment of scientific equipment. I can't even preserve my priceless specimens without it. It should have been delivered to me days ago."

"I'm sorry, sir," the young man said in a voice that couldn't have cared less. "If your materials had arrived, they would have been delivered to your hotel."

Solo pounded on the desk. "They arrived on the same boat with me, young man! Don't take that tone to me! I'll report you to the head of this company."

The young man shrugged. "You do that, sir."

Solo practically danced in impatience. "See, sir, I was an instructor of the man who owns this company. A word from me and you'll be reprimanded for your incompetence. Now I shall go back and inspect the shipping in your warehouse. I have no doubt I'll find my materials rotting back there!"

Solo strode toward the rear of the huge warehouse. The young

clerk ran around the desk. He shouted, "You can't go back there, sir!"

But Solo was already through the doors into the dark cavernous storage rooms. The young clerk stopped at the door. Perhaps the old fellow's good had been misplaced by some of the native handlers. Maybe he *did* know the company president. And besides it was too hot to run in this weather . . .

Solo wasted no time in pretending to look for a non-existent shipment of scientific materials. He knew what he was looking for and he searched, swiftly, diligently, and successfully.

He straightened from the feigned stoop of the naturalist and gazed at the huge crates. He walked in triumph among them. He was incredulous at the variety of articles being transferred, lab equipment, materials, and crate after crate of plants, all seemingly alike, and all of different stages of growth.

Pleased, he ran his hand across the address label. All were addressed the same: Via Air Freight from Mexico City to Helena, Montana, and reshipment by freight to Big Belt, Montana.

He heard the whisper of sound behind him. It was like the skittering of mice, and yet he went tense, instantly alert to danger.

The three men were young. They were Latin, dressed sharply. They walked shoulder to shoulder in their dark shirts and ice-cream suits and sleek new panama straw hats.

Solo was not fooled. The dark outline of shoulder holsters showed at their armpits.

They approached him steadily, their smiles fixed and unwavering. There was evil in their smiling, older than any of them.

Solo felt the hackles rising along the nape of his neck and he grinned blandly at them, retreating.

"Stand still, old fellow," one of them invited.

"What's the matter, young gentlemen?" Solo asked in the quavering voice of a teacher.

"We're going to take you apart, Uncle, and find out what's the matter," one of them said.

"There's some mistake," Solo said, retreating.

They came toward him steadily.

"We'll know after we take you apart, Uncle," one of the attackers said.

"If we are wrong, we'll apologize—"

"Yeah. To each separate part of you," the third said, laughing as if drunk.

Suddenly Solo grabbed a case and jerked it between himself and the three men. The crate landed with a crash.

Solo didn't wait to see what happened. Bent over in the manner of an old man, he raced toward the rear exit of the warehouse. He saw the sunlight out there, the open

docks, the waiting ships at anchor.

They looked incredibly far.

He thrust his hand into his jacket pocket, drew out a friction bomb. It was no larger than a capsule.

Still running, he turned and threw the capsule with all his strength toward the packing cases.

The explosion and fire were brief but intense. Concussion drove the men back. Solo ran.

He ran out on the docks without looking back. In the brilliant sunlight, he paused. The piers stretched endlessly in the silence and the heat. Lethargic quiet lay across the waterfront and the town.

He turned toward town and the main street. He had not run more than a dozen steps when one of the attackers appeared from a wall door.

He was no longer immaculate. His ice cream suit was smudged, black and torn. His hat was gone, but he was driven now by rage.

He had drawn his gun and when he saw Napoleon Solo he fired.

Tuh. Tuh.

Solo threw himself behind a small stack of cotton. The silenced gun chattered again. Bullets splintered the dock.

Solo hung close to the cotton bale. His sweated fingers closed on his last friction bomb.

He pressed there, counting, his arm poised to throw. He heard the pound of steps as the gunman ran toward him.

Now! he thought.

He tossed the friction bomb upward, arching it over the cotton bale. The explosion was sharp, the screams of the young hoodlum wild, and at that precise instant, Solo heard the *tuh, tuh* of a second silenced gun behind him.

He didn't bother looking over his shoulder. He burrowed there in between the cotton and the wall of the building.

"Ho, Pedro!" The call came from farther down the wharf.

Nearer, the first gunman still yelled in agony.

The second had slowed now, made wary by what he saw happening to his partner.

They approached the cotton warily, waiting until the three of them were regrouped. They spread out slightly now and crept forward in the sunlight, guns drawn.

From where he crouched, panting, Solo watched their shortened shadows creep toward him. The biggest part of the shadows it seemed to him were the guns in those outstretched hands.

"Ho," one of them said. "Why should we walk in on him and his friction bombs? Fire from where we are into the cotton. We drive him out, or we kill him. It's all one."

"I've a better idea," said the man who'd been blasted a second time. "Burn him out. I want to burn him out."

Crouched under the bales of tinder-dry cotton, Solo watched the wounded man, crazed with rage

and pain, set flame to waste from a cigarette lighter.

Solo held his breath. It was time to move. Gripping his fist closed as if holding a friction bomb poised to hurl, he lunged out from beneath the cotton bale, directly in the path of the pain-crazed hoodlum.

The man toppled back and screamed like a woman. He had learned twice, the hard way, about friction bombs.

His terrorized screams halted his pals for a split second. The frightened man forgot to hurl the fiery waste. The flames seared his hands. He cried out again.

He released the waste and the flames flickered, falling along his arms and inside his coat.

Solo kept moving. He struck the man hard, carrying him down and along the heated planks.

He rolled over quickly, putting the yelling man between him and the other two gunmen.

Before the frightened man could recover his wits in any part, Solo drove his extended fingers into his Adam's apple. Solo's other hand was ripping the gun from the hood's relaxing grasp.

Solo fired upward, with the dead weight of the hoodlum as his shield.

A shoe caught his wrist and the gun flew from his hand. He heard it rattling along the planks. At the same instant he heard, rather than felt, a shoe driven into his face.

They were on him then. The

burned man was jerked away from him, and they worked him over smoothly and professionally. They ripped away his glasses, tore off his jacket. They pulled off his shoes and dragged him across the wharf to the water.

Distantly, Solo heard a man's shouting. It was unreal. It was as if someone called his name from some remote place—

His head bumped across the planks, but there was no place for new pain in his body; all agony trunk lines were overloaded; new messages had to wait.

He heard the shouting growing closer. He heard the two men swearing. One of them said savagely, "Let's get out of here!"

Solo's head banged the thick planking at the edge of the wharf

and for a moment he hung over the side. The water glittered impossibly far, brighter than the sun and as distant.

Then he was being pulled back to the dock, and he recognized the voice of Carrero, his guide.

Solo stretched his eyes wide, trying to see Carrero's face, but all he could see was the blinding red ball of the sun.

Carrero's voice was quavering with concern. "I came looking for you, Senor. I worried. I thought you would not look right without your butterfly net. I went out and found it for you."

Solo grinned, whispering it. "What you did, was, you saved my life, old friend."

He tried to smile, but knew his face was a bloodied, hideous caricature of smiling.

FIVE

IN THE pressurized Pan-American jet cabin at thirty thousand feet, Napoleon Solo sweated.

He heard people chatting calmly around him. A stewardess tried to engage him in conversation, but he was in too much discomfort to think causually.

He went back over all he had seen, and had not seen, what he'd found and failed to find in that jungle.

He was still kicking it around in his mind when the plane set down at Kennedy airport. He passed through customs, came out on the concourse and hailed a taxi.

The cab driver had just missed making a killing in the market. He told Solo all about it on the ride into Manhattan. He was still explaining the details when Napoleon Solo stepped out of the cab in the east forties.

He walked toward the gleaming structure of the United Nations Building which dominated the neighborhood.

Going down a flight of steps, Solo entered Del Floria's Cleaning and Tailoring shop, an unprepossessing establishment in the basement of an ordinary-appearing whitestone building in the middle of a long block.

At the rear of the shop, Solo passed through a curtained dressing room, soon he entered the charged atmosphere of United Network Command for Law and Enforcement headquarters.

It was a gleaming place of chrome and steel where men and women moved swiftly.

The building itself quivered with the electronic feelers that reached out from roof and underground to the farthest crannies of the earth, continuously sending and receiving messages by every known method from carrier pigeon to the highest-secret sound-by-light apparatus.

At the admissions desk the young receptionist pinned an identification tag to Solo's lapel. This

tag would be scanned and read and approved by concealed electric eyes every few feet throughout the labyrinth of corridors.

Solo had gone only a few steps when lovely April Dancer came hurrying from one of the many elevators. "Solo." She touched his arm, wincing slightly at the sight of his bruised face. "What did you learn about Don?"

"I'm afraid he's dead," Solo said.

"You look as if you'd met his enemies. I hope they look even worse than you do."

"Afraid it was THRUSH's inning this time, April. But at least I know they were there, even if I don't why, or where they got to."

"You look ready to fall on your face."

Napoleon Solo tried to smile. "Nothing that a little loving care wouldn't improve. How about dinner after I report to Waverly?"

"Afraid I wouldn't be very good company," April said. "Just can't get my mind on pleasure—this dreadful business we're in."

Solo smiled at her. "Man does not live by dread alone, April."

April squeezed his arm. "Why don't you see me after you've talked with Alexander?"

Solo hadn't realized he was still smiling faintly when he faced Alexander Waverly in the Command Room until the chief demanded testily, "What do you find to smile about in a battered face like that?"

Solo wiped away the smile. "No, sir," he agreed. "There's nothing to smile about."

He made a full report of his arrival in San Miguel, his trek into the jungle. "At first I thought the whole thing was insane. There was absolutely no trace of this laboratory that Sayres described in such detail. In fact, the jungle in that spot looked exactly like all the swamp around it."

"Impossible."

"That's what I thought. But I was able to find the general outline of where the lab had stood—less than a week before!"

"Plant life grows lushly in the tropics, Solo," Waverly said. "But nothing like this."

"Nothing like this," Solo agreed. "Plants, vines, trees growing, full height, where a lab had stood a few days earlier. There is some kind of artificial stimulation of growth here, and as far as I can see, this must be behind whatever project THRUSH is working on."

"You're convinced THRUSH is behind this?"

Solo touched gingerly at his bruised face. "Physically I am convinced, sir. THRUSH—or somebody—left three guards at the port shipping warehouse to be sure nobody pried into the shipment of plants and equipment."

"Obviously you pried," Waverly said with a faint smile.

"I have the scars to prove it," Solo said. "But I also have an ad-

dress. Big Belt, Montana. I could barely locate it on any map. A village in the Big Belt Mountain ranges."

Waverly stood up, smiling crookedly. "I am proud of you, Solo. And I don't often say this to my men. I don't like to spoil them."

"I didn't find out how Sayes and Diego Viero were killed," Solo said. "But somehow, all traces of their body, clothing and equipment were destroyed, as if by some kind of intense heat."

Waverly nodded. "You'll want to be most cautious then."

"Sir?"

"When you arrive in the Big Belt Mountains. Our computers showed an area of disturbance up there. We dispatched Mr. Kuryakin to investigate a short time ago. You will join him at once via jet and copter."

Solo opened his battered mouth to protest—he could barely walk and he was looking forward to a hot shower and a date with April Dancer in that order—but he was too tired to make the effort. Mr. Waverly was like the umpire in a baseball game. You couldn't win, disputing one of his decisions anyhow.

SIX

ILLYA KURYAKIN stepped off the Greyhound bus into the flat village silence of Big Belt, Montana.

"You're sure this is the place?" he said doubtfully to the driver.

The driver grinned at him. "Leave the driving to us."

"Your driving was all right. I'm worried about your sense of direction," Illya said. He stared along the single hard packed main street, the dusty trees, the aged, wind-abrased buildings.

Inside the cafe-bus station, Illya inquired about the four-wheel jeep that had been ordered for him.

The clerk behind the desk didn't even bother looking up. "Afraid that jeep's not ready, sir."

"But we ordered it ready and waiting!" Illya said, annoyed by the villager's apathy.

The clerk shrugged. "Like I said, I'm sorry, mister."

Illya counted a slow ten. He managed a smile. "Where is the jeep?"

"Round the corner there at Mapes' Garage. You can't miss it."

Illya grinned. You couldn't miss anything in this town.

The bus was gone and there were only a few people lounging along Main Street when Illya stepped out on the walk.

He turned right, going past a grocery store, a dress shop toward a bar and the side street.

The gun that fired was not silenced. The rifle cracked and instinctively Illya toppled forward. The bullet sang waspishly past his head.

Illya crawled forward, then

sprawled behind the questionable concealment of a rain-barrel.

He did not move for a moment. He tried to make sense in his being ambushed. Friendly little town. No wonder U.N.C.L.E.'s computers kept spewing out reports of turbulence in the area, mysterious influx of strangers, sudden unexplained activity.

Cautiously, Illya edged his unruly blond head around the barrel. He stared across the street. A two-storied brick hotel, a window open, a curtain riffling in the breeze. The shot had come from that window, all right.

He waited another few seconds. The rifle barrel did not reappear in that window.

People ran out of stores, and at the hotel men and women were shouting.

Illya leaped up from behind the rain barrel, taking advantage of the excitement and people milling in the streets.

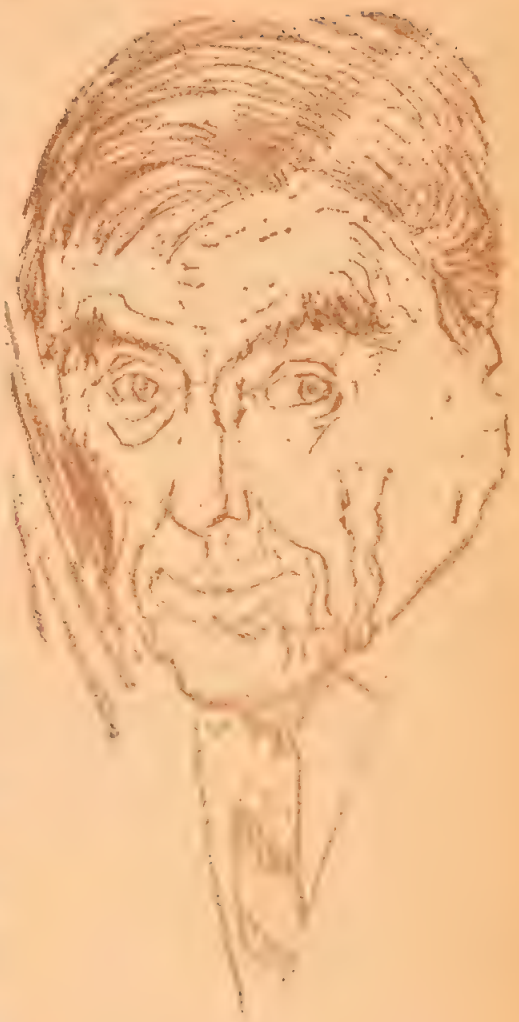
He almost bowled over a stout man in straw hat and smudged butcher's apron outside the grocery. The man yelled involuntarily.

"Charming little town," Illya said to him, bowing as he hurried past. "Charming. Loud, though."

The greasy mechanic at Mapes' garage had run halfway down the block as Illya rounded the corner.

"What's the excitement?" the man called to Illya.

Illya forced himself to walk



slowly, speak casually. "Tire blew out."

"That a fact?" The mechanic's face showed disappointment. "Could have sworn it was a deer rifle. Thought I knowed a deer rifle for sure. You positive it was a tire?" He fell in beside Illya and walked back to the littered garage-filling station with him.

Illya gazed in sick disbelief at the jeep parked on the garage

ramp. The four tires were pancaked flat, the hood was up and he saw the wiring had been ripped loose.

The mechanic said, "You the fellow ordered this jeep? It was ready. Last night I checked it out myself. It was all ready for you. But this morning, when I got here, I found it just like this."

"My grandmother always said never waste time crying over spilt milk," Illya said. "Let's get to work."

"Your grandmother live around here?" the mechanic asked.

"Why?" Illya bent over the engine.

"Lots of folks have that saying around here. I never really knowed what it meant."

"You repair the tires," Illya said, "I'll get these wires back together."

In less than half an hour the tires were fixed and Illya had the jeep engine purring.

"Never heard that car running so sweet," the mechanic said admiringly. He smiled at Illya. "Say, you ever want a job as a mechanic, you got one with me."

"I'll remember that," Illya promised. He swung into the jeep.

"You going up in the Big Belts prospecting, mister?" the mechanic shouted.

"Why?"

"Lots of men up there prospecting lately. Never have seen so much action going on."

"Not me," Illya assured him with a bland smile. "I'm just looking for the place where the deer and the antelope play."

A few miles outside the settlement the hard-packed road ended. An ill-defined trail led upward toward the foothills and the raw brown mountains rearing above them.

The car rattled as if the rocks would shake it to pieces. Illya clung to the wheel, bouncing on the hard seat.

He frowned, hearing distant thunder.

He checked the sky, finding it cloudless, sun-struck. But the thunder rumbled closer.

Illya turned, staring across his shoulder. His eyes widened. The noise was not thunder. From the foothills south of him a Cessna four-seater raced toward him.

He tried to tell himself that cattlemen and coyote hunters used small planes up here. But in less than two minutes, Illya admitted that the Cessna was zeroing in on him.

The plane banked, losing altitude. Watching it, Illya almost drove headlong into a boulder.

He jerked the car back onto the trail at the moment someone in the Cessna opened fire with a repeating rifle.

Illya yelled, clinging to the wheel. This attack was senseless. But it occurred to him that the attack from the hotel window in Big

Belt village hadn't made a lot of sense, either.

Illya stepped down hard on the gas.

The plane zoomed down, hawk-like, in pursuit. Bullets battered the little car, windshield shattering.

Holding his breath, Illya watched the plane climb slightly as it passed.

He looked about for concealment, but there was none except boulders and stunted trees. He stepped harder on the gas, climbing toward a distant hammock of pines.

He wasn't going to make it. He watched the plane bank daringly and turn at a few hundred feet, maneuvering with maniacal skill.

The plane returned, coming directly down and toward him.

Illya leaned forward into the protection of the dash. He whipped the jeep off the trail into a cluster of boulders.

Rifle bullets ricocheted off the hood and black holes pocked the shatter-webbed windshield.

Kuryakin swore. The boulders slowed him, but didn't impede the plane at all.

"Doesn't make sense letting them drive me out into these rocks," Illya said aloud.

He quickly whipped the little jeep back toward the trail. He cut across country, heading toward the pine hammock on the ridge.

The plane banked, making a steep turn. The roar of the plane engine was louder than the rattling of the jeep.

Suddenly Illya smelled gas. Nobody had to point out to him that the rifleman had scored a hit on the gas tank.

A tire whistled and the car listed, bumping frantically downslope. Another tire went and Illya lost control in the shale and rock outcroppings.

The plane had reached a turn. It climbed slightly and peeled off, returning.

Raging, talking to himself and sweat-wet, Illya slammed on brakes so hard the jeep sideslipped.

Catching up his overnight kit, Illya plunged from the car, striking hard on his knees. He felt the cuts of the sharp rocks, but had no time to submit to pain.

He thrust himself hard into the shadow of the boulder. He heard bullets rattling off the jeep, the shatter of glass, the scream of engine and fuselage as the plane passed less than a hundred feet above him.

He opened the bag, inching around the boulder. He watched the banking plane, saw it skid along the wind, making its turn for another pass.

He drew his U.N.C.L.E. special from the bag and socked an extension barrel on it, flipped up the telescopic sights.

Above him and directly before

him the Cessna faltered as if pilot and gunman were seeking him in the rocks, trying for a final and fatal pass.

The plane moved swiftly. It nosed toward him again, the rifle spitting red.

Pressed against the bounder, Illya coldly set the special, sighted through the telescopic glass. A section of the plane was magnified for him, brought inches before his face.

Around him shale and rock chips flew as the bullets clipped them from the approaching plane.

Illya Kuryakin held his breath and pressed the trigger.

He shot only once. He sagged against the boulder then and waited.

For a long time it was as if nothing happened, as though he'd missed. He knew better.

The sleek plane flicked past, its shadow slapping at him and for a brief instant shutting away the sun.

Slowly, Illya turned, watching the plane. It fled outward as if one with the wind. It banked, started an Immelmann, and then it was as if the string ran out.

The Cessna stopped, suddenly, as if it had struck an invisible wall. It faltered, wavered, went out of control. Nosing over, it plunged toward the earth far out in the rocky hillside.

Illya remained unmoving watching it. It was already burning before it struck the rocks. It landed with a wild explosion that rocked the hillside like a mild quake.

Illya sagged against the rocks, and put his blond head back.

His face was expressionless as he stared upward into the infinite blue.

After a moment he lifted his head and gazed out there where the remains of the plane and the land around it for a radius of fifty feet still burned.

He got up, slowly, dismounting his gun and replacing it in his overnight bag.

He inspected the gun-battered jeep. The job they'd done on it was thorough. The windshield was webbed, gray and opaque. Two tires were flat. Gas leaked to the ground. Even if he could make it run, it wouldn't go far.

He stood up, shoulders sagged round. He turned tiredly, inspecting the hills, the flat graze land, the wild mountains and the ranges lost in the blue haze. And this was when he heard the drone of another plane motor.

A shudder racked his body.

He was too tired to feel fear, or even rage. He toppled against the jeep, staring into the bleached sky.

It came racing toward him. The motor was different and he recognized that it was a helicopter. It could still chase him like a fox through this rocky country.

"Somebody's trying to tell me

something," he said. He sighed and opened the overnight bag again. He'd have to have his answer ready. They were persistent.

But he was stubborn.

ACT III—THE SUMMONS TO DEATH

ILLYA KURYAKIN slapped the Special together again and snapped the telescopic sight into place.

He straightened then, standing braced with his legs apart. Around him the rocks glinted back at the sun and his damaged jeep leaked it's gasoline into the sand.

The copter engine rattled and reverberated in the rocks, drowning out everything except the rage that gorged up in Kuryakin.

He tightened his grip on the gun, ready to slap it into place against his shoulder for a steady brace.

"Go ahead! Start it!" Illya raged, his voice lost and puny in the thunder of the chopper motors.

He shook his fist. The helicopter circled him. It whipped around him as if battering at him with its shadow. Then it side-slipped, flying out over the burned Cessna.

Gun ready, Illya awaited the first move from the men he could see in the plastic bubble.

The chopper returned to the rocks where Illya waited in impotent rage for the first attack. Suddenly it climbed, going almost vertically above him.

"Come back and fight, you finks!" Illya raged, shaking his weapon at the climbing copter.

The chopper continued upward, its engines quieting in the distance.

Illya didn't relax because it was going straight up, not leaving.

Suddenly the sun glinted as a plastic door was opened up there. A man hung balanced for a moment and then plunged suddenly outward.

Illya held the gun forgotten in his arms, watching. The jumper tumbled, one, two, three.

Suddenly parachute ropes popped free from the falling figure. The brilliantly colored chute budded and then blossomed like an air plant.

The figure dangled on the end of its strings and then floated toward Illya in the rocks.

Illya exhaled expansively, recognizing Napoleon Solo, even in the distance, even in a jump suit.

Solo struck the shale outcropping hard and was bobbled along like a cork for a few seconds before the chute deflated.

Illya remained where he was in the rocks. Solo unfastened the

chute, loosened the bulky jump suit and walked toward Illya, pushing his dark hair back from his face.

Illya flinched slightly at the sight of Solo' battered face. He looked as if he'd gone a few rounds with a meat grinder.

But Solo grinned, bowing slightly. "Howdy, partner. They sent me looking for you."

Illya Kuryakin remained tense, holding the light gun across his chest.

Solo laughed. "What's the matter? Don't you trust anybody any more?"

Illya exhaled and lowered the Special. He said, still raging, "I'd tell you just some of the violent things that have happened to me since I arrived in Big Belt this morning, but I can see by the condition of your face that you don't really care."

Solo nodded, touching gingerly at his bruised face with the back of his hand. "Right. You don't tell me your woes, I won't tell you mine."

Illya nodded in agreement and sagged against a boulder.

Solo strode past him, going toward the jeep.

"Where you going?" Illya asked mildly.

"Come on. Let's get out of here."

Illya shook his head. "Not in the jeep. That's one of my woes that I won't tell you about."

TWO

IT WAS late afternoon.

Footsore, sweated and thirsty, Solo and Kuryakin climbed an escarpment in the east range of the Big Belt mountains.

They stood on the brown rock ledge. All man's evil for that instant seemed dwarfed by the purpled majesty of the late afternoon mountain ranges. The peaks jutted upward toward the darkening sky, and beyond them higher peaks, capped with snow were yellow and ash gray far in the distance.

"One thing wrong with the world," Solo mused. "People."

Illya nodded. "Funny. Greedy men won't stop long enough to look around and see what they've got."

"Well, because they won't, we've got to get to work," Solo said. He unpacked the kit he'd carried strapped to his back, setting up a range-scanner like the one he'd used in the tropics.

When the instrument was set up, he said across his shoulder, "Just better warn you, Don Sayres was using one of these things when he was killed—mysteriously, instantly."

Illya shrugged. "One way is like another."

"Pleased you feel that way."

Illya sank to a small boulder. He removed his dust-caked shoes. "Right now I feel nothing but tired and hungry. Let's find out

what's going on and get out of here."

Solo nodded in silent assent. He worked some moments in silence and deep concentration.

Suddenly Napoleon Solo whistled.

Illya got up from the rock in his bare feet. Napoleon Solo moved aside.

Illya studied the pictures jumping darkly on the six-inch dial-face, or screen, a scene picked up as sound and transmitted as light, reproduced as photographs through any obstructions, even mountains.

Illya was silent a long time. At last he shook his head, "I see it. But I don't believe it. Tropical plants don't grow in Montana."

"I believe it," Solo said. "I know where those plants came from."

"What's the point of growing tropical plants in this part of the world?"

"There's a point to it, all right. Those plants are growing even larger and greener and wilder than they did down in that damned rain forest."

Illya shook his head. "What's the exact distance and range reading?"

Solo checked the readings. "Four miles, due west."

"That could be a long walk."

"Yes. That four miles is as the scanner and the crow flies."

Illya Kuryakin pushed his feet back into his shoes. "Much as I don't want to, we've got to get closer. We've got to get in there."

Solo checked the flickering pictures reproduced on the tiny screen another few moments. Illya Kuryakin sank to the rock and tied his shoes.

They both heard the noise from the rocks behind them at the same instant.

They moved as one man. Illya came up from the rock and Solo spun around, .38 U.N.C.L.E. Special drawn.

They stared down the barrel of a waiting rifle.

Tense, they gazed at the girl holding that gun. The first thing they saw was that she was extraordinarily beautifully, unspeakably frightened.

She trembled, barely able to hold the rifle fixed on them. This made her triply dangerous because her finger on the trigger quavered, too.

Her voice shook. "Don't move, either one of you, or I'll kill you."

Solo gave the quivering girl his blandest smile. "I wasn't planning any move."

"Nor me," Illya said. "Matter of fact, we were just sitting here, waiting for you to come along."

"Go ahead. Laugh," the girl said on the verge of tears. "I hope you can laugh as easily with a bullet in you."

"That's the hard way, all right," Solo agreed.

THREE

"WHO ARE YOU?" Napoleon Solo kept his voice level, afraid any undue excitement might drive her into hysterical use of that gun.

Her voice slashed at him, quavering, but the rage riding it. "Never mind that. I'll ask the questions."

Napoleon Solo watched the girl narrowly. "You don't act like a professional with that gun, but THRUSH has used more obvious gimmicks."

"THRUSH?" The girl scowled.

"That's right," Illya Kuryakin said. "Are you from THRUSH?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said, hysteria mounting behind her voice again.

"She thinks THRUSH is a bird," Illya said.

"Make your jokes," the girl said savagely, tilting the mouth of the rifle. Even with the gun in her hands there was a breathtaking loveliness about her. Not even the functional clothes she wore could truly detract from her eye-widening beauty.

Her hour-before-dawn black hair was brushed back carelessly from her face and toppled in lustrous waves almost to her shoulders. She wore Levis, denim shirt and scuffled boots as if they were the latest from the House of Dior. She looked to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty. "Death is no joke to me."

"You misunderstand," Illya said. "Would you want to see grown men cry?"

"My father cried," she said in that savage tone. "You people made him cry."

"Wait a minute! This is a case of mistaken identity," Illya began.

Her quavering voice rang out. "You stay where you are."

She jerked the gun up, her finger trembling on the trigger.

"Hang cool, miss," Solo advised. "You got a hate on, but we haven't earned it yet."

"That's right," Illya said. "If you shoot us for something that happened to your father, you've got the wrong men."

She stared at them, her lovely face gray. Her lips were perfectly formed, even without lip rouge. Her eyes were the color of violets, and her gaze wavered between them for a moment.

Suddenly she burst into tears, crying violently. She sobbed, standing shoulders round, the gun dangling at her side. Tears streaked across her cheeks, but she did not even lift her hand to her face.

It was as if she were too tired to raise her fingers.

Solo went slowly forward and gently removed the rifle from her arms.

She did not protest. It was as if she were relieved to be rid of it.

Solo started the fire in the gas cooker outside the girl's car, camped six miles down the west

side of the mountain. The car was parked hidden in a copse of pine between a narrow trail and a mountain brook.

He put on the coffee and when it was ready, carried the girl a steaming cup. She took it, her hands trembling.

Illya and Solo sat near her, drinking coffee in the gathering dark.

The girl held the cup in both hands. She seemed depleted, finished.

Solo said gently, "Why don't you tell us about it? Who are you looking for?"

"That's it." Her chin tilted. "I don't know. I could have killed both of you—and been wrong. I know that now. I've been half out of my mind since my father disappeared."

"That's a good place to begin," Solo said. "Tell us about your father, how he disappeared."

"He disappeared last night," the girl said. "But that wasn't the beginning of it. I don't know where it began, really. Everything's been so strange for the past year. . . . My father was an associate professor of biology at Northwestern—"

"Under Professor Ivey Nesbitt," Illya finished for her, as if thinking aloud.

She stared at them, caught between astonishment and suspicion. "How did you know that?"

Solo said, "We've been looking for Dr. Nesbitt. For a long time."

She frowned, staring at the steam rising from her coffee. "Well then, you know that Dr. Nesbitt simply disappeared from the school. No one heard anything from him."

"But your father came out here to Montana looking for Dr. Nesbitt," Solo prompted.

"Yes. He took a leave from the school this summer. I came along with him. I'm a secretary in a publishing office, but I gave up my job. I was worried about my father, and didn't want him traveling alone."

"Do you know why he came here to the Big Belt Mountains?"

"No."

"You're sure he never got any word from Dr. Nesbitt?"

"Of course I'm sure." Her voice rose slightly. "I would have known. He would have told me. No. It was a hunch he had. He said he and Dr. Nesbitt had done some biology experiments out in these ranges once years before. He had no other place to look, and so he came here, perhaps in desperation."

"Perhaps," Solo agreed. "Except that we're pretty sure that if Dr. Nesbitt is still alive he is somewhere in these mountains."

"Well, my father didn't know that, not for sure. He would have told me."

"Do you think he could have met Dr. Nesbitt somewhere and simply have gone away with him?"

"And left me? Why should he do that?"

"I don't know. Sometimes scientists do strange things."

"Not my father. The strange things were done to him."

"What strange things?" Illya prompted her.

She held her breath a moment. She stared upward, past the dark trees toward the star-silvered sky. They gazed at the perfection of her classic profile. She said, "The strangest of all was the summons to death that he got—"

"Summons to death?" Solo asked.

"Oh, I know it sounds incredible." She looked from Illya to Solo. "We were in the hotel at Big Belt. It was night. Father had been alone, riding through these mountains on horseback. He was tired. But he was troubled. Something was on his mind. Three or four times he looked as if he were going to tell me about it.

"Then suddenly a man walked into the lobby of the hotel where we were sitting. He walked across the room directly to us. He stared straight ahead. It was as if his eyes did not focus, as if he had no idea where he was, or what he was saying. It was as if he were in some mind-numbing trance, following

orders, speaking words he'd been programmed to speak.

"He said to my father, 'Are you Professor Samuel Connors?' "

She exhaled, watching them narrowly, knowing they would have trouble believing what she'd say next. "Then he handed my father this summons to death."

Solo whistled slightly. "You'll have to tell me more about that summons."

"Oh, I know you'll find it as hard to believe as I did—harder because at least I saw it, I know it existed."

"What did it look like?" Illya asked.

"A perfectly legal looking document. Like any summons to court, a subpoena. Only it was to no court I ever heard of, and the wording was so strange, accusing my father of a capital crime. I thought it was a joke. But my father didn't. He became very upset. He went up to his room, and later I heard him in there alone, and he was crying."

"Where was the court to be held? What was its name?"

She frowned, remembering. "It didn't make sense. It was called the seating of The Highest Referendary of Unquestioned Supreme Hearings. A jumble of words."

"Not quite," Solo said. "A jumble, all right. T-H-R-U-S-H. It makes that much sense."

"Sure. THRUSH's own Supreme Court, where they dispense their own brand of international law."

"They accused my father of crimes against them, crimes which were to be detailed at his trial, and before his execution. All this was in the summons."

"One thing emerges clearly from all this," Solo said. "Your father may not have found his friend Nesbitt, but he got so close to something or somebody, that THRUSH couldn't afford to permit him to live."

"But he didn't even know what they were accusing him of. I tried to talk him out of it, but he took it with deadly seriousness—and hardly knew I was there. But he kept saying he didn't know what he had done."

"That does make sense," Solo said, "even if it sounds wild to you. Perhaps he came near to something, nearer than he realized at that time, or saw something that was without meaning for him at that moment, but which THRUSH was afraid might become clear to him once he gave it some thought."

"Who are you?" the girl said, "that you know so much about this organization that calls itself THRUSH?"

"Well, we're no friends of theirs," Illya said. "We can safely tell you that much." He smiled at her. "Why don't you tell us now who you are?"

"I told you. I'm Professor Connor's daughter, his only child. My

mother has been dead for three years. The name that everybody calls me sounds so frivolous here, when my father is missing, and may be dead. But my father started it years ago. He said one day that bikinis were made for me, or that I was made for them." Her face flushed beautifully. "And the nickname, Bikini, has stuck ever since."

"Bikini?" Illya said. He smiled. "Believe me, it fits you—like a bikini."

FOUR

SOLO AND ILLYA sat for a long time outside the car-trailer after the exhausted Bikini had gone in to bed.

She had handed out sleeping bags.

"I know you're on some vital mission," she said. "But please stay here tonight. Whatever it is will wait for morning."

Solo and Illya talked in whispers.

Illya said, "A frightened girl."

"On the brink of hysteria," Solo agreed. "She shouldn't be out here alone."

"There remains that lab over there, and the night may be the best time to sneak in there," Illya said. "She's a lovely doll, and she's got a big problem, but we came out here looking for THRUSH and Dr. Nesbitt."

Solo checked his wrist watch. "Why don't we hit the sack for three or four hours? By that time she'll be deep asleep. We'll clear out then."

Illya nodded, yawning. "I could use the sack time."

"I'm too tired to ache even in the places that hurt," Solo said.

He fell asleep almost at once when he pushed down into the sleeping bag. Night winds riffled the tall pines, and the air was fresh, heavy, making him sleepier than ever. He dreamed he was wrestling an alligator, knowing he had to keep the animal on its back, or die. He struggled, but the saurian was too strong, and he was thrown over and he was being held down, but it was not an alligator holding him helpless, it was a girl.

She was shaking him, whispering his name over and over. "Mr. Solo. Please, Mr. Solo, wake up."

Solo struggled up from the depths of sleep with anguished reluctance.

He sat up, seeing Bikini bending over him in the darkness. She wore pajamas and a robe, and not even this combination could defeat her dream-stirring beauty.

He checked his wrist watch, and almost moaned. He had been asleep for fifteen minutes. A few feet away Illya breathed deeply and regularly, completely exhausted and sound asleep.

"Yes," he whispered. "What is it."

"I couldn't sleep."

He moaned. "Is that what you woke me up to tell me?"

She stayed on her knees, close beside him. "I know you are planing to leave during the night."

Solo winced. "Important business, Bikini."

"I know. But that's why I can't sleep. I'm going with you."

"You can't do that."

"I've got to. It's my only chance of finding my father. I know you're not looking for my father, but you may find him, along with whatever else you find. I want to be there."

"We'll bring him back to you if we can."

"I don't want you to leave me. Before I met you I wasn't scared; maybe I was too numb to be frightened. But now I realize the terrible danger in this place."

"Get in your car. Get out of here. If we find Dr. Connors we'll get word to you."

"I've no place to go without my father."

"Still, we can't take you with us."

"If you don't I'll follow you. I've got to find my father."

"Bikini, I don't know what kind of danger lies over there—"

"I've learned tonight that danger is all around here, in every direction. Please. Take me with you. I won't make any trouble—"

"That's what Eve must have said." Solo sighed heavily under the witchery of Bikini's sudden

smile. "Get some sleep. You're in on the party."

FIVE

ONCE THEY were in the dry canyon, locating the strange laboratory was no problem. Lights shielded from view by the high rising narrow ledge a thousand feet from the gorge sump, the building illumined the twisting dead-river bed for miles in both directions.

"We can't talk any more," Solo warned Illya and Bikini before they entered the mouth of the canyon. "They may be able to pick up my whispering from here. We know they were monitoring Don Sayres long before he came near them in the jungle."

"Maybe I should come in from the other end," Illya said. "That way one of us would have a surer chance of making it."

"Dark is running out," Solo said. "It'll be a tough trek to the other end of the canyon."

"It's worth a try."

Solo nodded. "Take Bikini with you."

"Illya laughs," Illya said. "If you're smart, you'll send her back. If she's smart, she'll go."

Solo shrugged. "We'll try to get in from here. Good luck."

Illya nodded and bounded up the steep ledge like a mountain goat. Solo watched him a moment; then he nodded at Bikini. "Stay close behind me."

She caught his belt in her fingers and he moved into the mouth of the canyon. Inside these rocks they were attacked by an incessant buzzing sound. Smile, Solo thought, you're on candid radar.

There was no sense turning back. He kept as close to the rocky wall as possible, slithering forward in the darkness. The buzzing sound grew louder. Far ahead he saw the brighter illumination of the lab around the sharp twists in the dry river bed.

The new sound was like a fist striking against a hand, swiftly, repeatedly.

Solo paused, listening. Bikini pressed close against his back.

He recognized the sound; it was that of men running in some sort of padded shoes.

Two armed guards came running around a sharp bend. They wore green fatigues, green caps with small, brilliant lights attached above the visors. The lights played across the ground ahead of them, illuminating the narrow canyon floor and the mountain walls.

Solo pressed hard against the rocks, pressing Bikini behind him.

The first guard ran past, his light touching at their feet until he was almost past. Then the glow illumined their faces.

The first guard didn't see them, but the second did. The first continued running.

As the second guard stopped, bringing up his gun, Solo chopped with the side of his hand across the man's throat. The guard slumped with a faint outcry.

It was enough to stop the man ahead. He turned around, his light raking across Bikini's stricken face.

Solo caught up the fallen guard's gun in one hand and threw it at the man running toward him.

The gun caught the guard across the chest, slowing him. Solo sprang toward him, tackling him and carrying him down to the ground under him.

The guard lost his hat. It fell to the ground and as the man rose, Solo saw his eyes were flat, did not focus, the face expressionless.

He remembered Bikini's saying that the man who had delivered the "summons to death" to her father had looked like a mindless robot.

Mindless or not, the man had been programed to fight furiously and to kill.

He brought his knee up, sending Solo sprawling beyond him.

Then he stalked Napoleon, gun lifted like a club.

Solo retreated, going into a side turn off the main artery of the canyon. This seemed to be what the guard wanted. He lunged at Solo, swung the rifle, and Napoleon Solo leaped back into the darkness to safety.

He swung again and Solo backed away again. Suddenly though, instinct and the abrupt chill cry of wind warned Solo that he was being driven toward a brink.

Solo flung himself against a boulder, stayed there, timing himself. The guard swung the rifle. At the last instant Solo ducked and the rifle smashed.

Solo sprang upward, catching the guard around the knees, taking him down. They fought on the floor of the narrow gorge, rolling almost to the edge.

Solo caught his breath. The pit yawned, bottomless, narrow, a fault in the rocks. A man's body would stay there forever.

The guard's cold hands closed on Solo's throat. Solo's head hung out over the chasm.

Solo set himself, trying to lever the guard over his head. It was impossible, the silent man was possessed of superhuman strength.

Solo forgot trying to throw the man and concentrated upon staying alive.

Those hands tightened. Solo felt the canyon and the sky changing places. Red stars wheeled and skidded before him.

He swung his legs up as high as he could, caught his shoe. The fingers closed on his throat. He felt consciousness slipping away, felt his body being pressed closer to the precipice edge.

He slipped the shoe off, gripping it with all his strength. He struck the guard across the nose with it. He did it again and again.

Nothing changed. In horror he began to be afraid that the man was incapable of feeling pain. The fingers closed and he felt the last oxygen burning in his lungs.

In desperation because there was nothing else to do, Solo kept striking the guard across the nose, knowing each time he struck the blows were weaker.

Suddenly the guard whimpered, as if the battering had broken whatever mind-binding spell he was under. The hands loosened. Solo didn't delay hoping for more. Gasping in a deep, sobbing breath, he fought upward, rolling over with the guard, pulling himself back to safety.

The guard went on fighting, striking, choking, pounding. But there was a difference and Solo felt it. Now he was fighting an ordinary man of ordinary strength, no longer driven by some outside will.

Solo's fist caught the guard on the jaw. The guard slumped, then grabbed Solo's body, rolling with

him toward the side of the bottomless chasm.

Solo fought wildly, realizing that the guard had been programed to kill, even if he died, too. This much remained to drive him.

Solo caught at the jutting rocks, fighting free of the guard's grasp. He thrust the heel of his hand against the man's jaw and thrust with all his strength.

The guard loosened his grip on Solo, gasping. Then Solo thrust out one more time and the guard fell away, slipping in terrible slow motion over the side of the cliff. His fingers grasped at jutting rocks, held.

Solo sank for a moment against the mountain wall, panting. He took up his shoe, stared at the man's hands gripping those rocks. Then he slipped the shoe on his foot and stood up. He exhaled heavily, speaking over the side of the cliff, "You will hang on, won't you?"

He ran around the curve in the canyon.

SIX

BIKINI was crouched in the shadows where he'd left her. In the light from the guard's cap he read the terror in her face. He wondered if she began to see just some of the peril into which she'd walked.

Her lips parted and she almost cried out her shock and relief at the sight of him.

He shook his head, warning her against speaking. She nodded and reached out her hand to him. Her fingers were icy.

He nodded, motioning her to follow him again. One thing he was sure of, even the lab radar would show only two of them. It was unlikely that it could reveal their identity. Two guards had come running out. Two people were returning. Perhaps they had bought a few moments of safety.

He decided to use it to the best advantage. Holding Bikini's hand tightly, he ran along the narrow gorge between the high dark canyon walls.

Suddenly the illumination was like the sun at noon. Solo paused at the turn in the rocks. Leaving Bikini pressed into the darkness, he inched forward, peered around the corner.

He caught his breath. He had seen this lab on the long-range scanner, but he'd had no idea of its immensity or complexity.

The floor of the canyon widened abruptly to a width of a hundred yards around this turn. Hundreds of feet above, the crest of the mountains closed to a few inches.

In this gorge the laboratory had been set up, and everything depended on its own artificial lighting and heating. A green haze seemed to envelope the glass-walled building, but only because

everywhere strange tropical plants grew lush and deeply green under this strange light. A kind of buffalo grass had sprouted wild on the bare canyon flooring under this light, growing almost to the narrowing turn.

Eyes distended, Solo remained an instant too long staring across the open space toward that glass-walled lab.

A sudden hissing alerted him. The sound ripped through the incessant buzzing which had almost become a part of the charged atmosphere.

Solo fell back behind the rock. A sharp beam of light whipped across the mouth of the open space.

Shocked, Napoleon Solo saw the buffalo grass burned gray where the beam touched it.

He stayed there for some moments, while his heart slowed to a regular beating again. Three more times the light beam reached for him, and barely missed.

He inched his way back to Bikini. She stared up at him questioningly.

Solo gazed down at Bikini for a moment, almost regretfully. She whispered. "What's the matter?"

He didn't answer. He reached out his left hand, tilting her chin slightly. Then he struck her sharply with his right, on the side of her jaw.

She slumped forward and he caught her gently.

Carrying her in his arms, he found a small break in the wall. He laid her down in the darkness, whispering. "You'll be safe here, Beautiful. Safer anyhow. Sweet dreams."

He ran back to the mouth of the canyon sump. The light beam still hissed, tilted now, no longer touching the grass as it swung out, reaching for him.

From his pack he took the small cannister and sprayed it from his legs upward, covering his body with a fine mist. As he worked, the haze hardened into a flexible plastic.

After a few moments the plastic was like suiting which encased his entire body.

He waited a few seconds longer, watching that beam whip across the open. When the light passed, he stepped boldly out and ran across the opening toward the lab. The plastic was unwieldy but was flexible enough to permit movement.

Solo was within fifty feet of the lab doors when the beam raked across him.

The plastic melted and ran like

teardrops. But he was only barely aware of it.

Solo staggered.

His mind fogged over. The green lights dimmed, seeming to recede into a darker canyon.

He felt as if an invisible fist struck him in the chest, barring his way, but not really hurting because it was as though he were numb.

He tried to stride forward, but his legs no longer obeyed commands from his mind.

He slumped to the ground, hearing the buzzing and the hissing louder than ever.

Gradually the green lights brightened and Napoleon Solo opened his eyes.

He was slumped upon his knees, half supported by two men, neither of whom even looked at him.

Things took shape before him. He saw that he was in a brilliantly illumined office-lab. Rows of equipment led away toward the greenhouses, where the lush tropical plants appeared to be growing visibly, as they might when seen in time-lapse photography.

Solo shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Ah, our guest is waking up."

Solo tilted his head, gazing at the man who had spoken.

He was a tall man with a wide frame upon which the flesh hung loosely. He was turned away from Solo at first and Solo was struck by the resemblance between this man and the statues of Julius Caesar—the strong chin, the fine Roman nose, the intelligent forehead, the balding head.

Then the man in the white smock turned full face and Solo caught his breath, wincing. The scientist's face was badly disfigured, the left eye sitting in the corner of its misshapen socket, the skin mottled, rutted.

"Dr. Nesbitt," he whispered.

Nesbitt fixed his glowering gaze upon Solo so intently that the young agent turned away, and then caught his breath, shocked a second time.

A few feet from him Illya Kuryakin was slumped in a chair, battered, scarcely more than half alive.

Illya gave him a faint salute.

Solo whispered it. "How did you get here?"

"It was a lot easier than I thought."

"What happened to you?"

Illya shrugged. Blood showed at the corner of his mouth. "You don't tell me your woes, I won't tell you mine."

Dr. Nesbitt came around the cluttered desk where he had been working. Turning his scarred face at an angle away from Napoleon Solo, he smiled.

"So now you and your friend have found me, Mr. Solo. Are you pleased?"

Solo spoke ruefully. "This isn't exactly the way we planned it."

"I suppose not. Still, you must have known, you and your interfering spy organization—"

"We were only trying to help, sir—"

"Help? Did it occur to any of you that I might not want help? You must have learned from what happened to your agents in Central America when they came prying that we could have easily have killed you and Mr. Kuryakin."

"We couldn't let that stop us, Doctor. We still believed you might want to communicate through us with your friends in the outside world."

Nesbitt's voice slashed at him. "I have no friends in the outside world. I have only my work."

"But that's it, sir. That's what puzzled us. You turned your back on a most rewarding and selfless career—disappeared. The world was puzzled. We couldn't turn our backs on you."

"I assure you there is no puzzlement. I'm here doing what I want to do. I have my experiments. I am successful beyond my most fantastic expectations."

"Jungle plants growing in Montana," Illya said.

Nesbitt heeled around, the scarred half of his face livid. "That is only the smallest part of it. Mr. Kuryakin. Plants that are like living things, plants growing to huge trees overnight. Incredible, wonderful plants."

Solo kept his voice low. "Your friends are deeply concerned, Doctor."

"I said it once, Solo. I have no friends. None. Except here. My plants. My living, breathing plants."

Solo continued trying to appeal to Nesbitt's reason. "You do have friends. Evidently more than you know, or care to admit. You have one friend who may have given his life searching for you."

Nesbitt straightened slightly. "Oh?"

"Sam Connors," Solo persisted. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

Nesbitt hesitated the space of a breath. He shrugged. "Connors? Once an under-professor of mine."

"At Northwestern. He thought he was a close friend."

"Well, he was wrong."

"He's disappeared. He may be dead. He was looking for you, deeply worried."

Nesbitt shrugged again. "Sorry to hear that."

"But you're not really concerned about his fate?"

Nesbitt straightened his wide, thin shoulders. "No. Not particularly. I am in no wise responsible for a misguided man like Professor Connors—"

"But he was looking for you!"

"I am very busy here. The people who are financing my experiments expect quick results. Nothing else concerns me."

"Not even the life or death of Sam Connors?"

"Nothing! I have no knowledge of Sam's death. I have no wish to kill—not even two meddlers like you—but I wish to be let alone. And I will be let alone—at whatever cost!"

Solo brought the "summons to death" which had been delivered to Sam Connors, from his pocket. The two guards were alert.

Solo handed the paper to the doctor. Nesbitt took it, scanned it calmly.

"Does it mean anything to you?" Solo persisted.

"Nothing. It looks like someone's tasteless idea of a joke."

"Whoever sent it had a deadly sense of humor."

At this instant whistles wailed throughout the laboratory. The guards leaped to attention.

A white-smocked man ran into the office from the corridor. "Dr. Nesbitt, there's a woman in the walled yard."

Swearing, Nesbitt ran from the room, following the white-smocked assistant.

A moment later an intercom blared, "All guards to the yard. At once."

The guards standing beside Illya and Kuryakin snapped to attention and ran like robots from the room.

"Mindless," Illya whispered. "They're mindless slaves."

Napoleon Solo jerked his head toward the doors opening off the office. "We've got less than two minutes. We've got to find out anything we can."

Illya nodded, agreeing. They ran toward the long hothouse beyond Nesbitt's rows of equipment.

Illya jerked open the door and they entered the room. They hesitated, staggered by the unnatural heat and humidity. It was almost impossible to breathe.

Quick scanning showed them the plants were all of one species, but there was every size from one inch to huge tubular plants with six foot leaves and twisting, snake-like branches.

The room was loud with a rustling, stirring of leaves and limbs.

"This is far enough," Solo said, gasping for breath and already sweating profusely. "Let's get out of here."

Illya nodded and heeled around. There was no handle on the inside of these doors. Illya thrust against them. They were securely locked and would not open from this side.

Solo wiped the sweat from his eyes. "Never mind. There's got to be more than one way out of here."

They saw another door far through narrowing aisles to their right. They ran toward it.

As they ran the large leaves brushed them, dripping water as hot as tears on them. The smell was sickeningly sweet, the smell of death. When they brushed one of the tentacle-like limbs, it adhered

to their clothing and they had to break free.

The rustling was louder and the limbs stirred faster all through the hot-house, although there was not the slightest breeze.

"Out that door," Solo said, the horror mounting in him.

He pushed through overhanging leaves and limbs that seemed to fight back at him, almost like human arms.

He broke clear and lunged toward the door. His feet brushed something and he stumbled to his knees.

"Solo!"

Illya's voice cried out behind him, but for the moment Solo stared at the dead man on the floor.

"Connors," he whispered, shaking his head. He'd seen the photograph Bikini carried of her father, but Sam had resembled his daughter in life, and he recognized him instantly.

Connors lay twisted on the floor, limp as a sawdust doll. He looked as if he had been crushed by a boa constrictor. All the bones in his body had been smashed.

"Solo!" Illya Kuryakin yelled again.

Solo jumped up, bringing his gaze from the shattered body on the floor.

Illya had tried to follow him through the growth of jungle plants, but had not made it. A green tentacle, larger than a fire hose had constricted about his throat and head.

Illya fought at it helplessly.

Solo looked around, feeling panic, sweated and almost drowned in the now wailing rustle of the plants all around them.

He caught up a pruning shears near the door and leaped toward the plant where Illya was trapped.

He drove the shears into the soft green texture of the constricting limb. Sap spurted out, sap that was pouring pinkly, almost like very anemic human blood.

III—INCIDENT OF THE KILLER PLANTS

DR. IVEY NESBIT strode along the corridor and entered his office. Neither side of his face betrayed any emotion at seeing that Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo were gone.

He was immediately followed by his white-smocked assistant, a sullen, unsmiling man clearly of Indian ancestry.

At a short distance behind the assistant, two staring-eyed guards came, half-dragging Bikini Connors.

They led her into the office, deposited her in the chair in which Illya had sat. They stood at attention on each side of her then, gazing emptily ahead.

"Please, Dr. Nesbitt," Bikini begged. "Where is my father?"

At his desk, the tall scientist ig-

nored her. He didn't look her way or appear to have heard her voice.

He glanced at the guards testily, as he might have gazed once at recalcitrant students in his classrooms. "What is the meaning of deserting your posts, letting our two prisoners run free?"

"Professor," the assistant said gently, "they don't hear you. Even if they do, they are unmoved by criticism or praise."

The doctor waved his arm. "Of course. One forgets one is dealing here with mindless animals, eh, Joe?"

"It's safest that way, Doctor," was all the Indian assistant said.

Nesbitt nodded, dismissing the subject.

Bikini spoke to him again, but it was as if he could not be reached by anyone from the outside world, from his past.

He turned his back, went to a bank of closed-circuit television screens. All glittered blackly, powered, waiting to be activated.

Nesbitt pressed buttons, opening the channel for each screen in turn, the walled yard, smaller labs, shipping areas, the hothouses, the corridors.

A hothouse camera swung across the long arena of tropical growth. Catching his breath, Nesbitt pressed a button, holding the camera in its position.

It was fixed on Solo, Kuryakin and a crushed body crumpled on the hothouse floor. The body the doctor ignored as if it did not exist for him, had never existed.

For a few moments, almost as if entranced by what he saw, Nesbitt watched Solo slashing at the huge arm of the writhing plant.

But as Napoleon Solo hacked the limb loose, the bloody sap spurting and oozing everywhere, Nesbitt's face darkened.

He pressed a button, spoke into a microphone at his side. Intercoms throughout the laboratory carried his voice. "There are two intruders in Hothouse One. Bring them to me."

Nesbitt's voice rattled through the humid greenhouse as Solo pulled Illya Kuryakin from the grasping tentacles of the plant.

For one moment Illya stared down in horror at Sam Connor's

crushed body, and thought, "But for the grace of God and Solo using pruning shears, that could be me—"

All doors of the hothouse were thrust open and armed guards appeared in each of them.

Illya and Solo stepped in close to the doors as they were thrust open near them. With all their strength they slammed the doors shut behind the guards.

As the robot-men turned, both Illya and Solo lunged at them, thrusting them stumbling over Connor's body.

The men threw their arms up as they went sprawling into the tangled green plants.

Obviously following all this on his closed-circuit TV, Nesbitt shouted, his voice crackling over the inter-com: "Door Six, Hothouse One. Stop those men."

But Illya and Solo were already going out of the door. Solo glanced back, watching the two guards trying to fight free of the grasping limbs, the rustling growing to a keening pitch.

For that instant the incredibly long corridor was empty. It was brightly lighted with what seemed half a hundred doors along it.

Solo waved his arm in the direction of the distant white-doored exit.

They ran together.

Nesbitt's laughter sounded chilled and sardonic from the inter-com speakers around them. It was nightmarish, as if laughter battered them from everywhere.

"He's watching us on TV," Illya gasped.

"Run," Solo said. He stayed close to the wall, sprinting toward that white-doored exit which seemed to recede the way it might in a bad dream.

"Run faster, gentlemen." Nesbitt's voice mocked them. "A little exercise, and then I shall stop you as I wish."

"Stay close to the wall," Solo warned Illya.

Illya nodded and side-stepped, but he was already too late.

They both heard the rising hiss. It was as if Illya had run into an invisible wall. The beam struck him and he stopped running, slowing, taking long steps and then halting as if paralyzed.

Solo leaped into the inset door nearest him as the hiss rose, approaching like an angry wasp.

The beam lashed at him and Solo put all his weight against the door, thrusting his way into it.

He toppled into a brightly lighted room and the door swung shut behind him.

He landed hard on his knees, and lifted his head slowly at the old chattering sound that overwhelmed him.

His eyes widened at the sight of the set faces, the empty eyes, the meaningless chatter. The people sat at long tables suspended from the ceiling. They didn't look at

each other, or at anything. They chattered, but it was less meaningful than squealing monkey noises in a tree.

Solo got to his feet, repelled and shaken by the sight of these mindless creatures.

He shook his head, retreated toward the door.

Faces turned his way, but not one pair of eyes actually focused on him. The eyes were like milky marbles and light reflected from them.

Solo wheeled around and grabbed at the door. Again there was no inside handle, and the door was locked securely.

Solo stared around helplessly. There was no other exit from this dormitory of the mindless. The only windows were set high in the walls.

Solo sagged against the door. The chattering went on, but he no longer listened.

From the intercom, Dr. Nesbitt's voice mocked him. "I expected you and Mr. Kuryakin to join our mindless ones eventually, Mr. Solo, but not so quickly. . . . What's wrong, my dear fellow? You don't look overjoyed."

Exhaling heavily, Solo sagged against the barred door.

The voices rose chattering, excited, wildly agitated by the sound of the doctor's voice on the intercom.

Napoleon Solo did not look at them.

TWO

SOLO FELT the door shiver. He recognized the sound: an electric impulse had activated the lock. He stepped away and the padded door was shoved open.

Two expressionless guards stepped into the room. They were armed with a gun that had a base like a small cannon, but which was obviously aluminum light. The barrel of the gun tapered to the mouth, which suddenly lighted up.

Solo toppled back, thinking they had subdued him with a portable light gun.

The chattering raged, but none of the people at the tables moved. The guards lifted Napoleon Solo, half-carrying him through the corridor toward Nesbitt's office.

There was no sign of Illya Kuryakin in the corridor. Solo felt ill, searching for him.

Strength had returned to his legs and arms by the time the guards led him inside Nesbitt's white-walled office.

Bikini jumped up and ran to him.

She pressed herself against him. Solo gritted his teeth to keep from falling under the pressure of her weight.

"Oh, Solo. He won't look at me," Bikini said. "He won't listen to me. He acts as if I don't exist."

"I don't think any of us exist for him very much, Bikini," Solo said.

"But he's known me since I was

a baby. He's my godfather. He was at my house all the time."

"I don't think he cares to remember that." Solo looked up at Nesbitt behind his desk. He spoke over the top of Bikini's dark hair, "Where is Illya, Doctor?"

Nesbitt smiled blandly. "You'll join him soon enough, Mr. Solo. Need I say any more than that?"

Bikini turned, but remained inside the circle of Solo's arms. She stared up at Nesbitt. "Please, where is my father?"

Solo stared up at Nesbitt, waiting for him to answer. But Nesbitt merely shrugged.

Solo knew he owed Bikini the truth about her father. But the truth was too brutal for her at this moment.

Just now he could not bring himself to say the words, *your father is dead, Bikini.*

He stood, watching Nesbitt.

The doctor's good eye gazed at him unblinkingly, the smile set. "I'm afraid my plans for you have been altered—by your own actions. I'd hoped to be able to allow the three of you to leave this place after undergoing a series of minor treatments for the removal of recent memory."

He shook his head. "I can't do that now. I'm sorry. The risk is too great."

Solo spoke coldly to Bikini. "What Dr. Nesbitt means is that Illya and I know your father is dead, and how he was killed—and that 'memory' removal is too risky because it doesn't work, but death does."

"My father," Bikini whispered. She pressed her face hard upon Napoleon's shoulder.

He touched her hair, gently, holding her. He felt her heated tears against his shoulder. Somehow it gave the world a sense of sanity that a girl could still cry for her father in this place.

It seemed less a nightmare.

Nesbitt's voice cut across Solo's thoughts. "Death. Yes, death works. Death is useful here, too, Solo. Professor Connor's death was useful—"

"You told us you didn't know about his death," Solo raged.

Dr. Nesbitt shrugged as if reminding him that nothing could matter less than what he said to them, or to anyone from the world of his past.

"He was sentenced to death by our highest court," Nesbitt said. "There was nothing I could do except see that he was executed in the way that would be most useful to us. Yes, even death must be useful."

Solo shook his head, hearing the doctor's words, but unable to believe a man could have so far receded from any human feelings of remorse, guilt, love or regret.

Dr. Nesbitt regretted nothing except time lost from his experiments.

"I'm sure our deaths will serve

you in some useful purpose," Solo said bitterly.

"When the time comes. Meantime, you and Mr. Kuryakin will work for us as mindless slaves—made mindless by *light,* Mr. Solo. And as for Miss Connors, I can use her body in my experiments with my plants—"

"Dr. Nesbitt. Ivey!" Bikini cried out, tormented. "What's happened to you? Once you loved my father and me."

"It's no good, Bikini," Solo said. "He's gone crackers—"

"You think I'm insane, Solo?" Dr. Nesbitt raged.

Solo shrugged. "I suspected it all along. I'm convinced, now that you've decided to use a body like hers as plant food—"

"Mr. Solo, I assure you that only the plants are important here. They are mutations, grown from the most ordinary jungle carnivori species, from those pitcher plants devouring flies and insects to what you saw in that hothouse—"

"Oh, Ivey," Bikini wailed. "Once you were the most beloved man in—"

"A fool girl like that, what does she know?" Dr. Nesbitt said to Solo, still refusing to speak directly to the daughter of his old associate. "Does she know of the horror of being stared at like a freak because of my disfigured face?"

"That's not true!" Bikini cried. "Nobody ever—"

"What does she know of the way I lived, dreading the way people cringed at the sight of my face? They wouldn't even let me work in peace until I came here.

"My plants don't cringe from me. My mindless slaves neither see nor react to my face. I don't have to watch people turn away."

"You're buried here," Solo said. "Worse than buried."

"That's where you're so wrong, Solo. Perhaps I shall yet control the world." Nesbitt looked around him now as though he wished to talk more fully about himself and his work.

"I shall set the world free by the use of light, Mr. Solo. I'm sure you've heard the theory that all light rays enter the eyes of animals and people, directly influencing the pituitary gland.

"In the same general way light radically affects the growth of plants. Scientists have exposed young rats to the rays of television rays and they die of severe brain damage within twelve days. By my own application of this theory I have made my slaves mindless.

"And I use the same X-ray light that comes from tv tubes, many times intensified. My jungle plants exposed to this X-ray light grow at phenomenal speed and to unheard of sizes.

"Light, Mr. Solo. Light to control. Light to kill. Light to grow. Everything subject to the intensity of my X-ray light. From a glow soft enough to be harmless to

strength to register wildly on a Geiger counter. With light I shall control the world."

"Sure. And THRUSH lets you believe that you will. In exchange for what? For those plants which will grow and multiply and kill?"

Nesbitt smiled. "That is part of my experiment."

He shook his head and lowered his voice to that reasonable tone so characteristic of the deranged, "So you can see why I cannot permit you people to leave here—to spread the word of my work?"

THREE

ILLYA FELT himself being lifted up from the corridor floor where he'd crumpled like a bug when stunned by the light beam.

The men lifting him carried him loosely between them. They did not speak to each other, moving like robots.

Double doors swung open in the corridor walls ahead of them and Illya saw he was being carried into a room of dark chocolate walls with hundreds of small lights set under the ceiling, across it, and along the sills.

The guards placed him in an ordinary appearing chair which lighted up under his weight.

When he attempted to stand, Illya found he was helpless to move. The action of the light was like a terrible magnet holding him pinned to the chair.

There was no pain of any kind. It was simply impossible to break the pull of the light-magnets which secured him in the strange chair.

After a moment Kuryakin stopped fighting. He felt the strength return to his arms and legs. He still had a sense of being dizzy, but even this lessened after a few moments. He examined the chair as the guards backed out of the room.

The doors closed and locked, Illya supposed. He looked around, finding the room extremely dark and himself seated in the lighted chair like an illumined island.

He shifted his weight, attempted to raise his arms from the chair.

He could not move. The darkness seemed to press in upon him, and he had the eerie sense that unseen eyes probed at him from the walls.

Illya felt a desperate urge to cry out, but he did not. He wouldn't give hidden onlookers the satisfaction.

Suddenly he heard the crackling noise such as a TV tube made warming up, and a forty inch screen suddenly lightened the dark wall directly before him.

Dr. Nesbitt's scarred face appeared upon the screen. His mouth pulled into a mocking smile. He said, "Are you comfortable, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya did not answer.

"Quite secure, Mr. Kuryakin? By now, I'm sure you're convinced

you cannot get out of that chair until I want you out of it. Eh?"

Illya waited. He hated this weird darkness. The television screen flickered, the gray shadows leaping across him, Dr. Nesbitt's strange eyes fixed upon him.

"The tests I'm about to subject you to, Mr. Kuryakin," Dr. Nesbitt said from the screen in his best lecture tone, "will be most fascinating to you, I'm sure, as long as you retain your senses."

The screen remained lighted, but Dr. Ivey Nesbitt's broken face disappeared.

"You look better like that," Illya said to the blank screen.

Illya heard the dim hum as some small motor was activated. The strip of flooring upon which his lighted chair was secured moved suddenly, sliding backward about ten feet.

The screen gradually darkened and the multicolored lights flashed on, along the ceiling and the floor. Somehow the room remained dark despite the many lights, and then Illya supposed this was caused by the action of one set of colored lights upon another.

His eyes burned slightly so that he wanted to rub them, but he could not lift his hand to his face.

The small motor hummed again and the strips before and behind the chair slowly folded over him and locked, making a wide circle.

After a moment the motor engaged again and two circular sections of the flooring on each side of him locked into place, securing him and the lighted chair inside a dark drum.

The lights on the chair flared and died, leaving him in darkness. The magnetic power was cut off, but now there was nowhere to go. There was not even room enough to stand up inside the drum.

Nesbitt's voice pursued him, even here. "Pain from light, Mr. Kuryakin. Are you acquainted with the phenomenon? I assure you, you will be well versed in the subject soon. The simplest application I can give to prepare you for what's going to happen to you is that of the young children, sitting for hours two to three feet from a television set. They suffer all manner of illnesses, including emotional disturbances, all induced by the X-ray light from that tube. The larger the picture tube, the greater the voltage.

"In other words, the greater intensification of that X-ray light, the more pain induced. We use this principle, Mr. Kuryakin, but of course, for our purposes, we have greatly refined it, and find that colored lights offer a great deal more intensity, just as does a colored tv picture tube."

The voice snapped off and for a moment the silence and darkness persisted until Illya thought Nesbitt had gone away and forgotten him.

Somewhere a switch clicked,

small motors hummed, and the first banks of lights flooded the drum. For a long time they remained constant, and then they alternated, colors flashing around and around the drum, faster and faster.

Illya Koryakin sweated. For a long time he was conscious of no other reaction to the lights.

They grew brighter, the colors alternating in some crazy scheme. The effect was of a clockwise flashing of lights, until suddenly Illya felt himself and the chair following, the drum turning with the lights, but at first slowly. Illya felt slightly nauseated.

He closed his eyes tightly. He could still see the lights, still felt the drum spinning him over backwards. He pressed his hands over his eyes, and realized the chair was stationary, the drum was not moving, only the whirling lights caused the sickening sensation of spinning.

He pressed his arm over his eyes. Sweat burned into them. He cried out involuntarily.

Although he pressed his arm tightly across his eyes, he suddenly could see the flashing lights through them!

The strength of those lights had been intensified. He could not escape them. After a moment the chair seemed to tilt backwards, to tip, fall and then turn, following those flashing lights.

Illya Kuryakin gagged, sick at his stomach.

The lights whirled faster and faster. He screamed as he wheeled and skidded, spinning around and around in the immobile chair, the unmoving drum . . .

The lights flashed off. At least Illya Kuryakin thought they did. The sides of the drum lowered; the top pieces unlocked and folded down.

Though he was sick at his stomach, Illya's mind was clear enough to warn him to get out of that chair.

He lunged upward.

He was not quick enough. The lights flashed on, the magnetic power of the chair held him securely. The chair slid forward.

For a long time he could feel the lights still spinning inside his head. Buckets of hot water were thrown on him, followed by buckets of cold water.

A voice from somewhere told him to rest. He did not recognize the voice. There was an almost kindly timbre in it, and he thought

wildly that the speaker might have human emotions, if only he could appeal to him.

But then the voice died away and he was left locked in the chair, a bright white island in the chocolate darkness.

Illya Kuryakin didn't know how long it was before he was returned to the light drum—perhaps hours, or days, or only minutes. His head ached and time had already lost meaning.

He closed his eyes against the whirling lights, but this did not help. The bright colors penetrated first his eye-lids, then seemed to enter at his temples, throbbing behind his eye-balls, twanging at the taut nerves. He pressed his fists hard against his temples and then the steady beams of colored lights battered at his forehead, at the base of his skull, the crown of his head.

Illya's head ached excrutiatingly now. Even when he came out of the drum, was doused with water, fed something which would not stay on his stomach, and told to rest, the headache persisted.

The human body might become accustomed to anything, even the throb of a headache if it remained constant. But the pressures, the intensity of the light was increased, lessened, speeded up.

And he spun in the drum, screaming against it, until he could not even hear his own screaming.

He could feel his nerves going. He wanted to break down into tears, to cry over nothing.

The lights never stopped whirling for him now, even when he knew they were off and he was outside the drum. They whirled, jabbing like lances through his brain.

The kindly voice asked him what day it was, and Illya could not answer. And after a long time the gentle questioner inquired Illya's name, and Illya could not answer.

He no longer knew.

For a few brief moments when he was doused with the buckets of ice water, Illya had lucid thoughts. He knew his name. He knew why he had come to this place. He remembered the lights. He remembered the kindly voice, the way he strained, listening for it, how lost he was when it went away and left him in the darkness.

Then the hot water would strike him and the lights would whirl.

In his lucid moments he warned himself his mind was going, his nerves already frayed, his emotions damaged. He had to cling to some thought that had nothing to do with this place. As the cold water struck him, he remembered New York, the restaurants, the Village, the subways, the sun on the United Nations complex early in the morning.

He gritted his teeth, swearing to hold these thoughts, to shut out what was happening to him.

The hot water washed it away.

He'd long since lost count of how many times he had been placed inside the drum. He never escaped the lights except for the briefest moments. The ice water no longer felt cold. Now there was no difference between hot and cold.

He'd trap a thought of some distant place, but the first whirling of the lights fragmented the thoughts; he was unable to hold on to them.

The light intensified, and so did the pain.

As the drum parted and the chair slid forward his wrist watch scratched his cheek.

Frantically, he grabbed the watch band, jerked the watch from his wrist.

The motor hummed, the short slide was almost over, the immobilizing lights would flash on. Or maybe they no longer bothered to magnetize him to the chair. Illya didn't know.

His mind could contain only the thought of the watch. He smashed it in his palm on the arm of the chair.

Trembling, he shook the broken shards of glass into his mouth, and dropped the watch.

At this instant the water struck him. He chewed sharp pieces of glass, feeling it cut his gums, his tongue, the roof of his mouth. He chewed again. Blood oozed from his lips.

Kuryakin could feel the temperature of the water. It was cold.

FOUR

SOLO PROWLED the small room which adjoined one of the thickly grown hothouses.

Bikini slumped against one of the three solid walls. She cried for a long time, her dark head pressed into her arms.

Solo stood at the fourth wall. It was thick green glass and afforded a view of the lushly growing cannibal plants out there.

He shook his head. He had no way to break this glass, yet it was almost as if Nesbitt wished he would. It was as though they dared him and Bikini to attempt to escape across that tangled growth.

He drew his arm across his forehead, wiping away perspiration. The cell was as hot as the hothouse beyond the glass, and more breathless.

The door was thrust open and Solo looked in that direction.

A guard stood at the opened door with a light-gun in his arms. Another entered the small hot room. He walked slowly, like a spring-wound toy that has run down.

His face was set, his eyes vacant. He faltered slightly.

Solo caught his breath. The man's face was battered, his hands cut. This was the man who had fought him at the canyon ledge, the one he'd left dangling over the precipice. He had hit him in the face with his shoe until the pain

somehow got through to his consciousness.

The guard looked at Napoleon Solo, shook his head in an almost imperceptible movement, then he turned and walked, still faltering, toward Bikini.

Solo set himself to jump the guard if he harmed Bikini. He closed the armed sentry at the door from his mind. It might be the last thing he ever did for Bikini.

But the guard merely drew a folded sheet of paper from his tunic.

He held it out toward Bikini in a quivering hand.

Solo caught his breath. He recognized the form, it was a 'a summons to death' like the one delivered to Bikini's father at the hotel in Big Belt.

Bikini took it. She didn't even glance at it. She recognized it, too.

The guard turned and stalked toward the door.

Bikini jumped up. She ran to Solo and pressed herself against him, tears in her eyes. Solo closed his arms about her, comforting the miserable, frightened girl.

The guard was barely at the door when Joe, Nesbitt's Indian assistant, brushed past the door sentry.

He caught the guard by the shirt front and pushed him against the wall, as if forgetting Solo and Bikini in a sudden savage fury.

Joe switched on a wall light, marched the guard to it, forced him to stare into its brilliance. The man gazed at the bulb, unblinking. His dry eyes did not even water.

Joe spoke urgently but quietly to the man with the light fixed in his eyes. The Indian's voice was low, controlled, almost kindly. "The summons was for Napoleon Solo. The summons was for Napoleon Solo."

Solo watched Joe, fascinated. He forgot the misdelivered summons. This didn't seem very important right now. He was seeing one of Nesbitt's mindless slaves being programed, by light. The programing was much like that done to computers, Solo thought, except that the computers were memory tapes and transistors, and here the scientist was dealing with a man driven mindless by some sort of exquisite torture.

FIVE

THE INDIAN assistant moved toward Napoleon Solo. The man's dark face was impassive.

"We've come for the girl," Joe said.

Solo flinched, looking down at Bikini's dark head pressed on his shoulder. She was deeply asleep. She had been able to relax because she trusted him. She felt secure in his arms, even in this pace.

"She's asleep," Solo said, his chilled voice warning Joe flatly to keep his hands off of her. The Indian merely smiled coldly, spoke

sharply, and the two guards entered, armed with small rifles. They stood ready at Joe's side.

"You'll still have to take her," Solo said.

The Indian bent forward, catching Bikini's arm. He shook her. The girl came awake slowly, protesting.

Solo set himself. Joe shook Bikini again, lifted her. As Joe rose, Solo came up on the balls of his feet. His fist caught Joe on the jaw, staggering him.

He released his hold on Bikini and fell backwards. He struck hard against the glass wall. It trembled under his weight.

Beyond the glass the huge leaves and thick limbs quivered, set into motion by the vibration.

Solo came up, moving, crouched toward Joe.

A rifle butt caught Solo in the forehead. Bikini screamed.

Solo staggered, his legs buckling under him. He landed on his knees. Vaguely, he saw Joe pull himself up, shake his head and then order the guards out of the cell with the girl.

Solo saw it as if from a great distance, and he knew Bikini was screaming, but he could barely hear her.

The guards half-dragged Bikini to the corridor entrance of Hothouse One. Behind them, Joe tested his jaw, his face twisted.

The guards thrust open the doors. The giant plants inside set up a rustling, waving motion at the movement.

"Inside," Joe ordered.

Bikini shook her head, staring wide-eyed at the long writhing green tentacles, the huge crying leaves.

Joe jerked his head. The guards caught Bikini's arms, thrusting her through the door.

Bikini toppled on the walkway. She sprang to her feet and ran to the doors. They were closed in her face. She beat against them.

The sound set up a wild reaction among the plants. The snake-like limbs reached out, the leaves waved, the thick trunks seemed to quiver.

Bikini pressed against the door, staring in awe at the giant green plants.

From an intercom Dr. Nesbitt's voice seemed to fill the room, setting the plants in violent motion again.

"You must fight to live, my dear. You don't have a chance. As you see, some of the walks are wide. Some are almost grown over. But the wide ones are open only because the plants are pulled back. Any movement in them and the plants will crowd in, reaching out, even growing in the direction of the sound. It's the way they live, my dear."

Bikini pressed her fist over her mouth to keep from crying out.

"Perhaps if you run, my dear," Nesbitt's voice suggested. "Run.

You may find a place to run. You may break free from their tentacles. You must offer some challenge to the plants, my dear, or your unfortunate death will serve no useful purpose."

Suddenly Bikini screamed.

As Nesbitt had talked, long green tentacles had struck against the walls, holding as if with suction cups, and now reached out swiftly toward her.

They approached from both sides of the door.

"You're not safe there, my dear," Nesbitt's voice taunted. "I suggest you run."

Bikini did not move. Petrified with fear, she remained pressed against the door until the slimy, serpent-like tentacles clapped against her arms from both sides.

Screaming, she broke free and ran again.

Ahead of her the center aisle seemed wide and clear. But as she ran along it, the motion of her body stirred the plants on each side into frantic action. Trunks bent, leaves shook and tentacle limbs grasped out.

A huge arm-like limb struck her across the head and sent her reeling.

Toppling to the floor, Bikini slid along it. She remained there stunned for only a few moments, but smaller limbs, nearer the ground, sprang out, clutching at her legs, arms, dress.

"Run. Run. Run." Nesbitt's voice commanded loudly from the inter-com speakers.

Bikini leaped. She realized in sudden horror that Nesbitt was like a cat playing with a mouse. When he shouted at her to run, it wasn't advice he was interested in. His voice, any sound, caused violent reactions in the plants so that they swung out, reaching toward the sound. And when she moved, this activated them even more violently.

She ran a few steps. Tentacles struck out like snakes. One closed about her throat. She caught at it, tearing it free.

Her movement brought newer limbs grabbing at her. In horror Bikini screamed, and more bushes leaned toward her, closing in upon her.

She broke free, falling away from the writhing tentacles.

She stumbled and fell to the floor on a narrow walk. The plants near her trembled, sending out eager feelers.

Holding her breath, she inched forward, and the bushes quieted behind her.

The exhausted girl laughed, on the verge of hysteria. Plants reacted, snagging at her. She lay still for some moments. The plants quieted.

When Nesbitt spoke over the intercom, they roused again, but seemed to subside.

She told herself she must lie unmoving where she was. These

plants reacted to noise, lay quiescent in silence.

She lay still. For some moment nothing happened. From the inter-com, Nesbitt spoke, his voice loud, taunting.

The plants quivered, rustling, unfurling long green limbs.

Bikini remained unmoving. She drew only shallow breaths. Perspiration stood on her forehead, burned into her eyes, but she did not stir, even to wipe it away.

She wanted to laugh in exhausted triumph. But she made no sound. The plants around her seemed quieted. They barely stirred, even when Nesbitt's voice rattled the inter-com.

She did not know how long she could remain in this position, but she was alive, and this was all Bikini was thinking about.

Suddenly she screamed, the sound spewing from her.

She lunged upward to find green branches closed on her ankles and her legs, like ropes.

Bikini fought wildly at the limbs, breaking free. But her movement set the nearest plants in wild motion.

She leaped to her feet, trembling, and stared quickly around, her face rigid.

Then she ran, fighting the limbs around her.

Dr. Nesbitt's voice taunted her. "That's better, my dear. That's the kind of challenge that's worthwhile. Run, girl, run!"

ACT IV—INCIDENT OF THE TRIAL BY LIGHT

SOLO WAS LED into the circular, fantastically illuminated room by two guards.

They pointed to a bare, highly polished table, told him to sit on it. When he did they stood at attention at his side.

The room was not large, perhaps like a surgery amphitheatre, with a judge's bench on a raised dais, with six judge's chairs behind it. The desk glistened and reflected lights.

Near the table where Solo sat was another one similar to it, and as completely bare.

Above him, and around the room in an elevated semi-circle, looking down on the bench and the two tables in the cleared area were rows of empty chairs. But after a few moments three men entered from behind the bench and took their places in the center chairs.

Solo stared at them incredulous. Action of light from the desk blotted out their faces to him. The heads were blanked out, almost as if they were headless bodies.

When the three judges had taken their places, two men entered from each side of the room. One came to the table where Solo sat, the other went to the similar table near it. Lights blotted out the faces of these two men, too, no matter where they moved.

One of the guards touched So-

lo's shoulder, ordering him to place the 'death summons' before him on the bared table.

This folded sheet of paper was the only materials of the trial in evidence.

A voice from a speaker in front of the judges' bench droned, "Seated are three supreme justices of the highest court. The Highest Referendary of Unquestioned Supreme Hearings is now in session. All proceedings of this court are voice-recorded. Seated with the accused is his defense attorney, appointed by the Court of Supreme Hearings."

One of the judges spoke. "The prosecution may open the case of World Order versus Napoleon Solo."

The man seated at the table near Solo got to his feet. The light, blotting his face from Solo's view, followed him.

The prosecutor stalked before the bench. "Prosecution will show that the defendant is guilty of all charges listed against him before this court."

A judge said, "We will dispense with the reading of those charges."

"I'd like to hear them read," Napoleon Solo said. His defense counsel shook his light-struck head at him, warning him to be silent.

A judge said coldly, "Defendant is permitted to speak only when it is time for him to admit to the charges proved against him in this court. Until this time he must remain silent and allow his defense attorney to speak for him. Only the defense attorney will be recognized by this court."

Solo shook his head, staring up at those light-blotted faces.

The voice from the speaker said, "Defendant will step into the witness chair."

A small chair inside a cage was eased out before the bench, suspended there. When Napoleon Solo protested, his defense attorney touched his arm warningly again and the guards placed Solo inside the cage. He sat down in the low chair so that his knees were almost up to his chest. The cage door was locked.

The defense attorney sat back at the table, apparently checking over the charges in the death summons.

The prosecutor said, "Do you admit that you came to this place with the avowed purpose of violence against the people herein?"

Solo started to answer, but the judges commanded him to silence. If an answer was required, they reminded him, his defense counsel would make it.

This gentleman remained silent at the defense table.

Solo sweated in the cage, raging against this mockery of justice. Still, he knew these men were deadly serious, listening to the further charges against him shouted by the prosecutor.

"You advocate the overthrow of our way of life by force? . . . You

entered illegally? . . . You attacked and assaulted the person of two of our guards. . . . You would destroy all that we here in this room hold dear?

"Are you not guilty of these charges? And are you not guilty of the further charges of planned murder? Treason? Spying? Are you not guilty?"

The defense attorney rose then, and spoke, for the first and only time during Napoleon Solo's trial. He said in a low, sad tone, "The defendant admits guilt to all these charges. He repents of his crimes against you. He is heartily sorry for his misdoings. But he understands there can be but one sentence in accord with justice; his crimes do not permit of even the recommendation of mercy.

"He throws himself upon the mercy of this court and asks only that he be allowed to die in the manner which will serve the cause of humanity under our great system most fully."

Solo stared. A judge spoke calmly. "There will be no need to hear from the defendant. The sentence is death, to be executed in a way most benefitting our inquiries into science."

TWO

SOLO WAS led to his cell. He felt nothing as far as the sentence of the strange court was concerned. They had never suggested the trial would be impartial. The summons had ordered him to a hearing of the treasonable charges leveled against him.

He prowled the cubicle, less concerned about what would happen to him than for the safety of Illya Kuryakin and Bikini.

Solo had not learned anything about Illya since he had seen him struck down by the light beam in the corridor. And Bikini?

He shook his head in anguish, not permitting himself to think about either of them.

The door opened, suddenly. Solo stared in complete astonishment, his mouth sagged open. Illya Kuryakin walked in.

Solo shook his head, feeling ill. It was Kuryakin—or Kuryakin's body. Illya was dressed in the green fatigues that all the guards wore, and his face was rigid, his eyes empty and staring.

Illya held a light-gun across his chest. He stared straight ahead, at nothing.

Solo gazed at him.

"Illya," he said.

Illya did not even hear him.

"No good to talk to him, Mr. Solo," Nesbitt's voice rattled the intercom. "He's gone quite beyond the reach of your voice."

Solo did not speak again, watching the way Illya stood, like a robot, a living dead man.

"Mr. Kuryakin is your guard, Mr. Solo. Isn't this a nice touch? Eh? I like its irony, Solo. You will

die, when your turn comes, among my plants.

"Meantime, I warn you, Mr. Kuryakin has been programed to kill you if you attempt to escape. An ironic touch that's lovely, eh, Solo?

"Surely you appreciate its grandeur? Guarded by your own former comrade, who is now one of my mindless slaves . . . Yes, if you try to escape, your own former friend will kill you. As I said, we indeed all of us have inside ourselves the seeds of our own destruction."

The intercom crackled a moment. "And now I am busy, Mr. Solo. You will forgive me if I leave you to the mercies of your former friend? I warn you, he has no memory, no stirring of memory of your past association. If you make a move to escape, or to attack him, he will kill you."

The intercom went dead.

Solo passed his hand nervously across his eyes. "Illya, can't you hear me?" He stared in disbelief at his friend.

Illya didn't move and Solo's helplessness mounted. He said in desperation, "That girl, Illya. We brought her in here—and they are going to kill her—feed her to those plants."

It was as if Illya Kuryakin could not even hear him. He remained unmoving, holding the gun at ready across his chest.

Solo went tense, remembering that Joe had warned Nesbitt that the mindless ones could not be reached by ordinary conversation.

They could be reached only by light, by a voice speaking to them, programing them.

In his anxiety, Napoleon Solo took sudden swift steps toward the door.

Illya jerked the light-gun up, his finger trembling on the trigger. The eyes remained flat, dead.

Solo stopped, forced himself to return to the glass window and then to walk to the other wall, slowly. During this time he planned his next move, not looking toward Illya. He kept everything, every movement casual.

Finally Solo reached the switch which Joe had activated in order to talk to the guard earlier. Then he turned, knowing that Illya would follow.

He kept moving until the beam of the light struck Illya full in the face.

Illya did not blink.

Solo drew a deep breath, forced himself to speak softly, in the kindly, gentle gray tone that Joe had used on the guard. The light in their faces controlled them.

Light controlled everything here. Light was the source of strength, the life giving force for the plants. It meant everything, life, death, power!

Solo trembled with anxiety, realizing he had figured out the key that would open the doors to this

place. Light was power, but light had to have a source.

There were no power lines into this canyon. THRUSH would not want outside power. It would open too many avenues to question.

That meant that all this light came from one source. Generators in this building.

Sweating, Solo forced himself to remain calm, to keep his voice low, level, unhurried, gentle.

The lights shone in Illya's eyes. Solo's gentle voice caressed him, "Generators. We must destroy the generators." He said it a dozen times, repeating it slowly, distinctly, without passion.

Then, seeing no response in Illya's face, he began the second phase, repeating it again and again: "Take me to the generators. Kill anyone who tries to stop us."

Suddenly, Illya stepped out of the direct beam of the light.

Solo held his breath, waiting for Illya to bring the light-gun up to kill him.

Illya Kuryakin nodded—and winked.

THREE

ILLYA PUSHED open the cell door, jerked his head, motioning Solo ahead of him.

In the corridor Illya Kuryakin moved woodenly. Sweating, Napoleon Solo wanted to run, but knew better. He kept his pace to that set by Illya.

Suddenly Dr. Nesbitt's voice crackled wildly on the intercom and Solo knew the scientist was watching them on his screen.

Nesbitt screamed. "Guard! You fool! What are you doing? Where are you taking the prisoner?"

Indian Joe's voice crackled across Dr. Nesbitt's on the intercom. "The guard can't hear you, sir—or obey you."

"Stop them!" Dr. Nesbitt shouted.

From the lab-office, two guards raced, following the white-smocked Indian.

"This is it," Solo said from the corner of his mouth.

"Keep walking," Illya ordered.

Behind them, Indian Joe forgot his calm image. He yelled. "Escape. Escape. Stop them. Kill. Kill!"

Illya Kuryakin turned in that wooden manner, lifted the light-gun, pressed the trigger.

Holding his breath, Solo saw Joe and the three guards stagger and fall under the power of the portable light-gun.

"Now run," Illya said.

Solo didn't wait. Illya followed, carrying the gun. He stopped twice, firing along the corridor. At the down exit, Solo pushed through the door. He was half way down the steps before Illya came through and moved after him.

The pulsing of the huge generators reached up to them.

The flat-eyed men working in

the engine room did not even look up at them as they ran out on the catwalk above the large turbines.

Illya Kuryakin lifted the light-gun, fired it.

The explosion rocked the engine room.

Darkness was instantaneous and complete. Illya snapped on the small light above the visor of his green cap. This was the only glow in the cavernous dark.

They ran back along the catwalk and up the steps. The building was in complete darkness.

As they came out into the corridor they heard Dr. Nesbitt's voice raging over the intercom. "My plants! The light! My plants "

The man was beside himself with panic. Madness was in his voice, now completely unmasked.

Solo said, "We have to get Bikini. It may be too late already. Those hellish plants—"

Illya said, "Easier said than done, my friend. But we'll give it a try."

Dr. Nesbitt screamed, "You fools! You can never escape. Come with me. I can make you kings among men! As for the foolish girl—forget her. She is dead. Or she will be before you can do anything about it! I will save you! I can make you great. I can—"

Illya said, "You are as nutty as a fruitcake, professor. Sorry to be blunt about it, old man, but good old THRUSH sold you down the creek and you can never row back. You're done, old boy. Can't say as how I'm very sorry."

Solo said, "This girl may be dying while you're talking, Illya. Let's go!"

"This way," Illya said. They ran along the corridor, Illya's small cap light bouncing ahead of them.

At door six, Hothouse one, Solo said. "The door, Illya."

Illya turned the light-gun on it.

Solo thrust it open and they ran inside.

The place was a confusion of wild rustling, writhing in the darkness.

"Bikini!" Solo yelled.

She screamed his name from somewhere in the darkness.

"We'll have to shoot and hack our way in to her," Illya said.

A burst from the light-gun withered plants in a wide perimeter before them. The illumination showed them Bikini caught in the constricting grasp of huge branches.

"Glass!" Solo said.

Almost in the same instant, Illya Kuryakin fired, shattering one of the walls.

Solo caught up a shard and cut his way through the thick growth toward Bikini, who sobbed his name.

Illya fired short bursts of the light-gun, withering away the plants around them as they had burned, petrifying in the jungle.

Solo cut away the last limb holding Bikini. She sagged gratefully

into his arms, grasping him convulsively around the waist.

"Let's split this scene," Illya said. "They won't get the generators started, but they might get the guards out."

They went through the gun-shattered glass wall into the walled garden. Here the night was gray.

There was illumination enough to see Dr. Nesbitt standing out there with a light-gun, barring the way.

"Hit the dirt!" Solo warned.

He sprang forward, carrying Bikini with him.

Dr. Nesbitt fired the light-gun, screaming like a banshee.

Illya sank to his knees, taking his time. He leveled the gun, pressed the trigger.

They saw Dr. Nesbitt drop the light-gun, stagger to his knees and pitch forward again.

Solo was already getting up, clinging to Bikini's hand, taking her with him.

With Napoleon Solo and Bikini Collins just ahead of him, Illya Kuryakin ran toward the exit, the canyon, the way out.

Behind him he heard running men, mindless howling, and the sharp sound of the burst of a gun. Illya didn't know whether the guards were after them or not, long ago programed to foil any escape. He wasn't taking any chances.

He paused long enough to send one last burst of flame toward the darkened laboratory, and then he ran faster, into the freedom that was ahead.

In the Next Issue—Complete and Exclusively Yours—

THE DEADLY DARK AFFAIR

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BREATH of SUSPICION

by

ARTHUR PORGES

Solve, if you can, the riddle of the purloined ruby—the crime that couldn't happen.

TO A CASUAL observer, George Fort Elgin suggested nothing so much as a furious ape that had just been tricked with a wax banana. He was short, squat, dark, and hairy enough to thatch four more Beatles.

A second, more careful examination, however, might get to his eyes, which were brown and twinkling, soft and warm as melted caramel. And his voice, low and very slow—to older women it invariably brought memories of the vintage Fredric March.

As a professor, his specialty had been logic and scientific method, confined strictly to theory, since he was the most ham-handed experimenter ever driven from a laboratory to the accompaniment of breaking glass and the anguished screams of fellow workers—scalded, gassed, or blown up by his clumsy manipulations.

But in mathematics, and the iron rules of logic, when applied to plausible inference, he was just the opposite—quick, intuitive, and deadly accurate.

Which is why, on retirement, he suddenly found himself pressed into service as a crime-consultant by a former pupil, Lieutenant Granville. The detective had learned that if you gave Elgin all the pertinent data—the more baffling the better—he would find the hidden pattern every time.

Right now, Granville, pouch-eyed and haggard, was cursing himself for not coming sooner.

"It's an impossible crime," he said. "We nab Gardner by surprise—or almost. He had maybe ten minutes' warning from some fink in the lobby. He had no chance to get rid of the ruby before reaching his hotel room, and one of my men watched the door after that, until I got there. Then we crashed in, and find him sitting at the desk calmly drinking whisky, and grinning at us, as if to say: 'Sure, you got me, but on what charge? Where's the evidence? No ruby in here, Jack!' "

"I don't have to ask how well you searched," Elgin said.

"No, but I'll tell you anyhow. The room, inch-by-inch; the sills of the two windows; anything reachable with cane or umbrella—which he didn't have. Across from his room is the Barker Electronics Company. All the windows are sealed—air conditioning throughout—and covered with hardware cloth, which looks to be in excellent condition. Its roof is twelve stories up, four above Gardner's room; and the hotel has twenty floors.

"So he couldn't toss the ruby to either one, that's certain. Below, a blind alley. We went over that immediately, unwrapping every dirty scrap of paper or foil, in case he dropped the stone from his window, hoping to get it later. Nothing."

"And his person?"

"To the skin. Then we watched him like hungry vultures all the way downtown, with him in cuffs, and there the police surgeon did it again, even using a fluoroscope, in case Gardner swallowed the ruby. Another blank. Yet we know he had the thing with him when he entered that room."

"From what you say," Elgin said slowly, "he had no chance to dump it before going to his room, didn't even know he was spotted. With only ten minutes' warning from a friend in the lobby, he hadn't time to line up a confederate in any adjoining room, or in the Barker Building, even if the windows were open there, which isn't the case. It is a puzzle, I'll admit. If he hid the ruby, it must have been a matter of quick, ingenious thinking; most admirable mind."

"Very," Granville said dryly. "Gardner's no fool; best jewel thief in the world, probably."

Elgin was silent for a moment, then he said, rather diffidently: "There's a somewhat obvious explanation which I hesitate to sug-

gest. But between us, pussyfooting seems foolish."

Granville flushed darkly.

"You needn't be tactful; Lily Marlowe's saying it loud and clear: that one of my men is the thief. She's screaming like a scalded eagle, because the ruby isn't insured. Gardner snatched it during a lapse in the policy."

"Who's Lily Marlowe?"

"Your ivory tower must be mighty high and well insulated," the lieutenant said. "She's a movie star. Carlos Ybarra, the dictator of Amazonia, gave her the ruby just a week ago today. Now it's gone, and my men and I are thieves by default, unless you pull another rabbit out of your hat, and fast."

"Why fast?" Elgin asked, getting to the heart of Granville's wry statement.

"Because I've a man on the room, and another on the alley. And the commissioner wants them off yesterday. We're always shorthanded."

"I have to ask this," the professor said. "Are you certain none of your men took it?"

"No. I know these men."

"All right," Elgin said crisply. "Give me the usual mass of data in that briefcase you're hugging, and I'll get to work on it. I can't promise anything, you understand."

"You never do," Granville said, a smile lighting his tired eyes. "But somehow, you seem to get answers." He put the briefcase on the cluttered desk. "It's all there. The contents of his pockets, what we found in the room, scale-drawings, photos—everything I could think of."

"Anything else to tell me in person, no matter how trivial?"

"One thing that puzzled me a bit, but really trivial. Gardner reeked of cloves. Presumably he was going to meet a fence. He's a fastidious guy, Gardner, but sweetening his breath for a fence! Unless," he added thoughtfully, "he was seeing his girl right after." He yawned cavernously. "I'm really pooped. If you get an idea—"

"I'll call you immediately. Get some rest; you look terrible."

"Can't; they'll be pulling my men off any time; can't waste a minute. Once they're gone, Gardner will have some pal get the ruby from where he stashed it. We've got to find it first, or I'm a thief for life." He yawned again, and left.

When he had gone, Elgin settled down with the briefcase, methodically going over all the evidence. Granville seemed to have missed nothing. There was no place for the ruby to go, but it was missing.

He sat there for two hours, reading, reflecting, using his trained imagination. And inevitably he was led to the one discrepancy—minor, but still at variance with logic. Gardner had taken cloves, but nowhere on his person

or in the room were there more, or —of greater significance—any wrappings.

Why would the man have disposed of them, instead of using the paper basket? Elgin thought he knew; the reasoning was mathematical in its iron linkages. And so, the next morning, by appointment, he met the eager lieutenant at Gardner's hotel room.

Brushing aside the detective's stream of questions, Elgin went to the window, and took a small pair of binoculars from his pocket, handling them so clumsily that Granville expected them to drop to the alley below.

After painfully focusing, he grunted, and handed them to the detective.

"There—on the Barker screen —that blob."

Granville, bewildered, managed to get a look.

"It's just a glob of something. What do you—"

"Gum," Elgin said laconically. "The cloves weren't lozenges, as we assumed; but gum. Gardner thought fast; he had only a few minutes. He probably used a whole package, or what was left—several sticks; and as soon as it was soft and sticky, wrapped the ruby in it, and flipped it across the fifteen foot gap to the Barker window-screen, where it would be pretty sure to stick. I suppose he'd have no trouble getting into the plant illegally some night."

"Trouble? There? Gardner could steal the watchman's false teeth! The old guy would need bells on that crook to lower the odds. But are you sure—?"

"Not a hundred per cent," Elgin said cautiously. "But the probability is most high. Anybody might use clove lozenges or gum, but why would he conceal the wrappings? There was nothing on him or in the room. Presumably they were crumpled and dropped in the alley. The only possible reason, it seems to me, is that he didn't want you even to think of gum. He was very foresighted, evidently; and may have guessed you'd notice his breath, whisky or not."

Granville looked at the blob again.

"Nothing else on the screen; nice and clean, I see." He shook his head wonderingly. "Cancel that moment of doubt. It's gum, and the ruby's inside, and my men and I are honest cops again."

All of which turned out to be true.

A NEW COMPLETE SOLO AND ILLYA NOVEL NEXT MONTH

OUR FAIR CITY

by ROBERT HEINLEIN

Silently she came and went, and
no man could stay her course, the willful
wraith who kept her strange vigil over our city.

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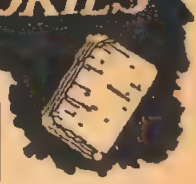
DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES



Robert Heinlein, author of "Our Fair City," must be rated, by any and all standards, one of the world's three major science fiction fantasy writers. Among other honors, he has won the coveted Hugo (the World Science Fiction Convention's award for the best novel of the year) no less than three times, the last for "Stranger in a Strange Land." Mr. Heinlein wrote the screen play for "Destination Moon," among other screen assignments. In his late fifties, he is currently working on another novel. It is a privilege to include "Our Fair City" in our Department of Lost Stories. *By its very nature, it belongs there. From time to time in this magazine you will see this department. When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whatever its length, has been remembered and revered as too good to be forgotten. It is a rare gift we bring you this month. The famous Robert Heinlein never wrote a bad story—and this is one of his best. Read it. You'll remember it for a long time.*

THE EDITORS

PETER PERKINS turned into the all-night parking lot and called out, "Hi, Pappy!"

The old parking lot attendant looked up and answered, "Be with you in a moment, Pete." He was tearing a Sunday comic sheet in narrow strips. A little whirlwind waltzed near him, picking up pieces of old newspaper and bits of dirt and flinging them in the faces of passing pedestrians. The old man held out to it a long streamer of paper.

"Here, Kitten," he coaxed. "Come, Kitten—"

The whirlwind hesitated, then drew itself up until it was quite tall, jumped two parked cars, and landed *sur le point* near him.

It seemed to sniff at the offering.

"Take it, Kitten," the old man called softly and let the gay streamer slip slowly from his fingers.

The whirlwind whipped it up and wound it around its middle. He tore off another and yet another.

The whirlwind wound them in a corkscrew through the loose

mass of dirty paper and trash that constituted its visible body. Renewed by cold gusts that poured down the canyon of tall buildings, it swirled faster and ever taller, while it lifted the colored paper ribbons in a fantastic upswept hair-do.

The old man turned, smiling. "Kitten does like new clothes."

"Take it easy, Pappy, or you'll have me believing in it."

"Eh? You don't have to believe in Kitten—you can *see* her."

"Yeah, sure—but you act as if she—I mean 'it'—could understand what you say."

"You still don't think so?" His voice was gently tolerant.

"Now, Pappy!"

"Hmm . . . lend me your hat." Pappy reached up and took it. "Here, Kitten," he called. "Come back, Kitten!"

The whirlwind was playing around over their heads, several stories high. It dipped down.

"Hey! Where you going with that hat?" demanded Perkins.

"Just a moment—Here, Kitten!"

The whirlwind sat down suddenly, spilling its load. The old man handed it the hat. The whirlwind snatched it and started it up a fast, long spiral.

"Hey!" cried Perkins. "What do you think you're doing? That's not funny—that hat cost me ten bucks only three years ago."

"Don't worry," the old man soothed. "Kitten will bring it back."

"She will, huh? More likely she'll dump it in the river."

"Oh, No! Kitten never drops anything she doesn't want to drop. Watch." The old man looked up to where the hat was dancing near the penthouse of the hotel across the street. "Kitten! Oh, Kitten! Bring it back."

The whirlwind hesitated, the hat fell a couple of stories. It swooped, caught it, and juggled it reluctantly. "Bring it *here*, Kitten."

The hat commenced a downward spiral, finishing in a long curving swoop. It hit Perkins full in the face. "She was trying to put it on your head," the attendamt explained. "Usually she's more accurate."

"She is, eh?" Perkins picked up his hat and stood looking at the whirlwind, mouth open.

"Convinced?" asked the old man.

" 'Convinced?' Oh, sho' sho.' " He looked back at his hat, then again at the whirlwind. "Pappy, this calls for a drink."

They went inside the lot's little shelter shack. Pappy found glasses; Perkins produced a pint, nearly full, and poured two generous slugs.

He tossed his down, poured another, and sat down.

"The first was in honor of Kitten," he announced. "This one is

to fortify me for the Mayor's banquet."

Pappy cluck-clucked sympathetically. "You have to cover that?"

"Have to write a column about *something*, Pappy. 'Last night Hizzoner the Mayor, surrounded by a glittering galaxy of highbinders, grifters, sycophants, and ballot thieves, was the recipient of a testimonial dinner celebrating—' Got to write something, Pappy; the cash customers expect it. Why don't I brace up like a man and go on relief?"

"Today's column was good, Pete," the old man comforted him. He picked up a copy of the *Daily Forum;* Perkins took it from him and ran his eye down his own column.

"Our Fair City, by Peter Perkins," he read, and below that "What, No Horse Cars? It is the tradition of our civic paradise that what was good enough for the founding fathers is good enough for us. We stumble over the very chuckhole in which great-uncle Tozier broke his leg in '09. It is good to know that the bath water, running out, is not gone forever, but will return through the kitchen faucet, thicker and disguised with chlorine, but the same. (Memo—Hizzoner uses bottled spring water. Must look into this.)

"But I must report a dismaying change. Someone has done away with the horse cars!

"You may not believe this. Our public conveyances run so seldom and slowly that you may not have noticed it; nevertheless I swear that I saw one wobbling down Grand Avenue with no horses of any sort. It seemed to be propelled by some new-fangled electrical device.

"Even in the atomic age some changes are too much. I urge all citizens—" Perkins gave a snort of disgust. "It's tackling a pillbox with a beanshooter, Pappy. This town is corrupt; it'll stay corrupt. Why should I beat out my brains on such piffle? Hand me the bottle."

"Don't be discouraged, Pete. The tyrant fears the laugh more than the assassin's bullet."

"Where'd you pick that up? Okay, so I'm not funny. I've tried laughing them out of office and it hasn't worked. My efforts are as pointless as the activities of your friend the whirling dervish."

The windows rattled under a gusty impact. "Don't talk that way about Kitten," the old man cautioned. "She's sensitive."

"I apologize." He stood up and bowed toward the door. "Kitten, I apologize. Your activities are *more* useful than mine."

He turned to his host. "Let's go out and talk to her, Pappy. I'd rather do that than go to the Mayor's banquet, if I had my druthers."

They went outside, Perkins

bearing with him the remains of the colored comic sheet. He began tearing off streamers. "Here, Kitty! Here, Kitty! Soup's on!"

The whirlwind bent down and accepted the strips as fast as he tore them. "She's still got the ones you gave her."

"Certainly," agreed Pappy. "Kitten is a pack rat. When she likes something she'll keep it indefinitely."

"Doesn't she ever get tired? There must be some calm days."

"It's never really calm here. It's the arrangement of the buildings and the way Third Street leads up from the river. But I think she hides her pet playthings on tops of buildings."

The newspaperman peered into the swirling trash. "I'll bet she's got newspapers from months back. Say, Pappy, I see a column in this, one about our trash collection service and how we don't clean our streets. I'll dig up some papers a couple of years old and claim that they have been blowing around town since publication."

"Why fake it?" answered Pappy, "Let's see what Kitten has." He whistled softly. "Come, baby —let Pappy see your playthings."

The whirlwind bulged out; its contents moved less rapidly. The attendant plucked a piece of old newspaper from it in passing. "Here's one at least three months old."

"We'll have to do better than that."

"I'll try again." He reached out and snatched another. "Last June."

"That's better."

A car honked for service and the old man hurried away. When he returned Perkins was still watching the hovering column.

"Any luck?" asked Pappy.

"She won't let me have them. Snatches them away."

"Naughty Kitten," the old man said. "Pete is a friend of ours. You be nice to him."

The whirlwind fidgeted uncertainly.

"It's all right," said Perkins. "She didn't know. But look, Pappy —see that piece up there? A front page."

"You want it?"

"Yes. Look closely—the headline reads 'DEWEY' something. You don't suppose she's been hording it since the '44 campaign?"

"Could be. Kitten has been around here as long as I can remember. And she does hoard things. Wait a second." He called out softly. Shortly the paper was in his hands. "Now we'll see."

Perkins peered at it. "I'll be a short-term Senator! Can you top that, Pappy?"

The headline read: DEWEY CAPTURES MANILA; the date was "1898".

Fifteen minutes later they were still considering it over the last of

Perkins' bottle. The newspaperman stared at the yellowed, filthy sheet. "Don't tell me this has been blowing around town for the last half century."

"Why not?"

" 'Why not?' Well, I'll concede that the streets haven't been cleaned in that time, but this paper wouldn't last. Sun and rain and so forth."

"Kitten is very careful of her toys. She probably put it under cover during bad weather."

"For the love of Mike, Pappy, you don't really believe—But you do. Frankly, I don't care where she got it; the official theory is going to be that this particular piece of paper has been kicking around our dirty streets, unnoticed and uncollected, for the past fifty years. Boy, am I going to have fun!"

He rolled the fragment carefully and started to put it in his pocket.

"Say, don't do that!" his host protested.

"Why not? I'm going to take it down and get a pic of it."

"You mustn't! It belongs to Kitten—I just borrowed it."

"Huh? Are you nuts?"

"She'll be upset if she doesn't get it back. Please, Pete—she'll let you look at it any time you want to."

The old man was so earnest that Perkins was stopped. "Suppose we never see it again? My story hangs on it."

"It's no good to *you*—*she* has to keep it, to make your story stand up. Don't worry—I'll tell her that she mustn't lose it under any circumstances."

"Well—okay." They stepped outside and Pappy talked earnestly to Kitten, then gave her the 1898 fragment.

She promptly tucked it into the top of her column. Perkins said good-by to Pappy, and started to leave the lot. He paused and turned around, looking a little befuddled.

"Say, Pappy—"

"Yes, Pete?"

"You don't really think that whirlwind is alive, do you?"

"Why not?"

" 'Why not?' Why not, the man says?"

"Well," said Pappy reasonably, "how do you know *you* are alive?"

"But . . . why, because I—well, now, if you put it—" He stopped. "I don't know. You got me, pal."

Pappy smiled. "You see?"

"Uh, I guess so. G'night, Pappy. G'night, Kitten." He tipped his hat to the whirlwind. The column bowed.

The managing editor sent for Perkins. "Look, Pete," he said, chucking a sheaf of grey copy paper at him, "whimsy is all right, but I'd like to see some copy that wasn't dashed off in a gin mill."

Perkins looked over the pages shoved at him. "Our Fair City" by Peter Perkins. *Whistle Up The*

Wind. Walking our streets always is a piquant, even adventurous, experience. We pick our way through the assorted trash, bits of old garbage, cigarette butts, and other less appetizing items that stud our sidewalks while our faces are assaulted by more buoyant souvenirs, the confetti of last Hallowe'en, shreds of dead leaves, and other items too weather-beaten to be identified. However, I had always assumed that a constant turn-over in the riches of our streets caused them to renew themselves at least every seven years—

The column then told of the whirlwind that contained the fifty-year-old newspaper and challenged any other city in the country to match it.

" 'Smatter with it?" demanded Perkins.

"Beating the drum about the filth in the streets is fine, Pete, but give it a factual approach."

Perkins leaned over the desk. "Boss, this *is* factual."

"Huh? Don't be silly, Pete."

"Silly, he says. Look—" Perkins gave him a circumstantial account of Kitten and the 1898 newspaper.

"Pete, you must have been drinking."

"Only coffee and tomato juice. Cross my heart and hope to die."

"How about yesterday? I'll bet the whirlwind came right up to the bar with you."

"I was cold, stone—" Perkins stopped himself and stood on his dignity. "That's my story. Print it or fire me."

"Don't be like that, Pete. I don't want your job; I just want a column with some meat. Dig up some facts on man-hours and costs for street cleaning, compared with other cities."

"Who'd read that junk? Come down the street with me. I'll *show* you the facts. Wait a moment—I'll pick up a photographer."

A few minutes later Perkins was introducing the managing editor and Clarence V. Weems to Pappy. Clarence unlimbered his camera.

"Take a pic of him?" he asked.

"Not yet, Clarence. Pappy, can you get Kitten to give us back the museum piece?"

"Why, sure." The old man looked up and whistled. "Oh, Kitten! Come to Pappy."

Above their heads a tiny gust took shape, picked up bits of paper and stray leaves, and settled on the lot.

Perkins peered into it. "She hasn't got it," he said in aggrieved tones.

"She'll get it." Pappy stepped forward until the whirlwind enfolded him. They could see his lips move, but the words did not reach them.

"Now?" said Clarence.

"Not yet."

The whirlwind bounded up and leapt over an adjoining building.

DEWE

The managing editor opened his mouth, closed it again.

Kitten was soon back. She had dropped everything else and had just one piece of paper—*the* paper.

"Now!" said Perkins. "Can you get a shot of that paper, Clarence—while it's in the air?"

"Natch," said Clarence, and raised his Speed Graphic. "Back a little, and hold it," he ordered, speaking to the whirlwind.

Kitten hesitated and seemed about to skitter away. "Bring it around slow and easy, Kitten," Pappy supplemented, "and turn it over—no, no! Not that way—the other edge up."

The paper flattened out and sailed slowly past them, the headline showing.

"Did you get it?" Perkins demanded.

"Natch," said Clarence. "Is that all?" he asked the editor.

"Natc—I mean, 'that's all'."

"Okay," said Clarence, picked up his case, and left.

The editor sighed.

"Gentlemen," he said, "let's have a drink."

Four drinks later Perkins and his boss were still arguing. Pappy had left.

"Be reasonable, Boss," Pete was saying, "you can't print an item about a live whirlwind. They'd laugh you out of town."

Managing Editor Gaines straightened himself.

"It's the policy of the *Forum* to print all the news, and print it straight. This is news—we print it." He relaxed. "Hey! Waiter! More of the same—and not so much soda."

"But it's scientifically impossible."

"You saw it, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

Gaines stopped him. "We'll ask the Smithsonian Institute to investigate it."

"They'll laugh at you," Perkins insisted. "Ever hear of mass hypnotism?"

"Huh? No, that's no explanation—Clarence saw it, too."

"What does that prove?"

"Obvious—to be hypnotized you have to have a mind. *Ipso facto.*"

"You mean *Ipse dixit.*"

"Quit hiccuping, Perkins. You shouldn't drink in the daytime. Now start over and say it slowly."

"How do you know Clarence doesn't have a mind?"

"Prove it."

"Well, he's alive—he must have some sort of a mind, then."

"That's just what I was saying. The whirlwind is alive; therefore it has a mind. Perkins, if those longbeards from the Smithsonian are going to persist in their unscientific attitude, I for one will not stand for it. The *Forum* will not stand for it. You will not stand for it."

"Won't I?"

"Not for one minute. I want you to know the *Forum* is behind you, Pete. You go back to the parking lot and get an interview with that whirlwind."

"But I've got one. You wouldn't let me print it."

"Who wouldn't let you print it? I'll fire him! Come on, Pete. We're going to blow this town sky high. Stop the run. Hold the front page. Get busy!"

He put on Pete's hat and strode rapidly into the men's room.

PETE SETTLED himself at his desk with a container of coffee, a can of tomato juice, and the Midnight Final (late afternoon) edition. Under a 4-col. cut of Kitten's toy was his column, boxed and moved to the front page. 18-point boldface ordered SEE EDITORIAL PAGE 12. On page 12 another black line enjoined him to SEE "OUR FAIR CITY" PAGE ONE. He ignored this and read: MR. MAYOR—RESIGN ! ! ! !

Pete read it and chuckled. "An ill wind—" "—symbolic of the spiritual filth lurking in the dark corners of the city hall." "—will grow to cyclonic proportions and sweep a corrupt and shameless administration from office."

The editorial pointed out that the contract for street cleaning and trash removal was held by the Mayor's brother-in-law, and then suggested that the whirlwind could give better service cheaper.

The telephone jingled. He picked it up and said, "Okay—you started it."

"Pete—is that you?" Pappy's voice demanded. "They got me down at the station house."

"What for?"

"They claim Kitten is a public nuisance."

"I'll be right over." He stopped by the art department, snagged Clarence, and left. Pappy was seated in the station lieutenant's office, looking stubborn. Perkins shoved his way in.

"What's he here for?" he demanded, jerking a thumb at Pappy.

The lieutenant looked sour. "What are you butting in for, Perkins? You're not his lawyer."

"Now?" said Clarence.

"Not yet, Clarence. For news, Dumbrosky, I work for a newspaper, remember? I repeat—what's he in for?"

"Obstructing an officer in the performance of his duty."

"That right, Pappy?"

The old man looked disgusted. "This character—" He indicated one of the policemen "—comes up to my lot and tries to snatch the Manila-Bay paper away from Kitten. I tell her to keep it up out of his way. Then he waves his stick at me and orders me to take it away from her. I tell him what he can do with his stick." He shrugged. "So here we are."

"I get it," Perkins told him, and

turned to Dumbrosky. "You got a call from the city hall, didn't you? So you sent Dugan down to do the dirty work. What I don't get is why you sent Dugan. I hear he's so dumb you don't even let him collect the pay-off on his own beat."

"That's a lie!" put in Dugan. "I do so—"

"Shut up, Dugan!" his boss thundered. "Now, see here, Perkins—you clear out. There ain't no story here."

" 'No story'?" Perkins said softly. "The police force tries to arrest a whirlwind and you say there's no story?"

"Now?" said Clarence.

"Nobody tried to arrest no whirlwind! Now scram."

"Then how come you're charging Pappy with obstructing an officer? What was Dugan doing—flying a kite?"

"He's not charged with obstructing an officer."

"He's not, eh? Just what have you booked him for?"

"He's not booked. We're holding him for questioning."

"So? Not booked, no warrant, no crime alleged, just pick up a citizen and roust him around, Gestapo style." Perkins turned to Pappy. "You're not under arrest. My advice is to get up and walk out that door."

Pappy started to get up. "Hey!" Lieutenant Dumbrosky bounded out of his chair, grabbed Pappy by the shoulder and pushed him down. "I'm giving the orders around here. You stay—"

"Now!" yelled Perkins Clarence's flashbulb froze them. Then Dumbrosky started up again.

"Who let him in here? Dugan—get that camera."

"Nyannh!" said Clarence and held it away from the cop. They started doing a little Maypole dance, with Clarence as the Maypole.

"Hold it!" yelled Perkins. "Go ahead and grab the camera, Dugan—I'm just aching to write the story. 'Police Lieutenant Destroys Evidence of Police Brutality.' "

"What do you want I should do, Lieutenant?" pleaded Dugan.

Dumbrosky looked disgusted. "Siddown and close your face. Don't use that picture, Perkins—I'm warning you."

"Of what? Going to make me dance with Dugan? Come on, Pappy. Come on, Clarence." They left.

"Our Fair City" read the next day: "City Hall Starts Clean Up. While the city street cleaners were enjoying their usual siesta, Lieutenant Dumbrosky, acting on orders of Hizzoner's office, raided our Third Avenue whirlwind. It went sour, as Patrolman Dugan could not entice the whirlwind into the paddy wagon. Dauntless Dugan was undeterred; he took a citizen standing nearby, one James Metcalfe, parking lot attendant, into custody as an accomplice of

the whirlwind. An accomplice in what, Dugan didn't say—everybody knows that an accomplice is something pretty awful. Lieutenant Dumbrosky question the accomplice. See cut. Lieutenant Dumbrowsky weighs 215 pounds, without his shoes. The accomplice weighs 119.

"Moral: Don't get underfoot when the police department is playing games with the wind.

"P. S. As we go to press, the whirlwind is still holding the 1898 museum piece. Stop by Third and Main and take a look. Better hurry—Dumbrosky is expected to make an arrest momentarily."

Pete's column continued needling the administration the following day: *"Those Missing Files. It is annoying to know that any document needed by the Grand Jury is sure to be mislaid before it can be introduced in evidence. We suggest that Kitten, our Third Avenue Whirlwind, be hired by the city as file clerk extraordinary and entrusted with any item which is likely to be needed later. She could take the special civil exam used to reward the faithful—the one nobody ever flunks.*

"Indeed, why limit Kitten to a lowly clerical job? She is persistent—and she hangs on to what she gets.

"No one will argue that she is less qualified than some city officials we have had.

"Let's run Kitten for Mayor! She's an ideal candidate—she has the common touch, she doesn't mind hurly-burly, she runs around in circles, she knows how to throw dirt, and the opposition can't pin anything on her.

"As to the sort of Mayor she would make, there is an old story—Aesop told it—about King Log and King Stork. We're fed up with King Stork; King Log would be welcome relief.

"Memo to Hizzoner—what did *become of those Grand Avenue paving bids?*

"P.S. Kitten still has the 1898 newspaper on exhibit. Stop by and see it before our police department figures out some way to intimidate a whirlwind."

PETE SNAGGED Clarence and drifted down to the parking lot. The lot was fenced now; a man at a gate handed them two tickets but waved away their money. Inside he found a large circle chained off for Kitten and Pappy inside it. They pushed their way through the crowd to the old man.

"Looks like you're coining money, Pappy."

"Should be, but I'm not. They tried to close me up this morning, Pete. Wanted me to pay the fifty-dollars-a-day circus-and-carnival fee and post a bond besides. So I quit charging for the tickets—but I'm keeping track of them. I'll sue 'em, by gee."

"You won't collect, not in this

town. Never mind, we'll make 'em squirm till they let up."

"That's not all. They tried to capture Kitten this morning."

"Huh? Who? How?"

"The cops. They showed up with one of those blower machines used to ventilate manholes, rigged to run backwards and take a suction. The idea was to suck Kitten down into it, or anyhow to grab what she was carrying."

Pete whistled. "You should have called me."

"Wasn't necessary. I warned Kitten and she stashed the Spanish-War paper someplace, then came back. She loved it. She went through that machine about six times, like a merry-go-round. She'd zip through and come out more full of pep than ever. Last time through she took Sergeant Yancel's cap with her and it clogged the machine and ruined his cap. They got disgusted and left."

Pete chortled. "You still should have called me. Clarence should have gotten a picture of that."

"Got it," said Clarence.

"Huh? I didn't know you were here this morning, Clarence."

"You didn't ask me."

Pete looked at him. "Clarence, darling—the idea of a news picture is to print it, not to hide it in the art department."

"On your desk," said Clarence promptly.

"Oh. Well, let's move on to a less confusing subject. Pappy, I'd like to put up a big sign here."

"Why not? What do you want to say?"

"Kitten-for-Mayor—Whirlwind Campaign Headquarters. Stick a twenty-four-sheet across the corner of the lot, where they can see it both ways. It fits in with—oh, oh! Company, girls!" He jerked his head toward the entrance.

Sergeant Yancel was back. "All right, all right!" he was saying. "Move on! Clear out of here."

He and three cohorts were urging the spectators out of the lot. Pete went to him.

"What goes on, Yancel?"

Yancel looked around. "Oh, it's you, huh? Well, you, too—we got to clear this place out. Emergency."

Pete looked back over his shoulder. "Better get Kitten out of the way, Pappy!" he called out. "*Now,* Clarence."

"Got it," said Clarence.

"Okay," Pete answered. "Now, Yancel, you might tell me what it is we just took a picture of, so we can title it properly."

"Smart guy. You and your stooge had better scram if you don't want your heads blown off. We're setting up a bazooka."

"You're setting up a *what?*" Pete looked toward the squad car, unbelievingly. Sure enough, two of the cops were unloading a bazooka. "Keep shooting, kid," he said to Clarence.

"Natch," said Clarence.

"And quit popping your bubble gum. Now look, Yancel—I'm just a newsboy. What in the world is the idea?"

"Stick around and find out, wise guy." Yancel turned away. "Okay there! Start doing it—commence firing!"

One of the cops looked up. "At what, Sergeant?"

"I thought you used to be a marine—at the whirlwind, of course."

Pappy leaned over Pete's shoulder, "What are they doing?"

"I'm beginning to get a glimmering. Pappy, keep Kitten out of range—I think they mean to put a rocket shell through her gizzard. It might bust up her dynamic stability or something."

"Kitten's safe. I told her to hide. But this is crazy, Pete. They must be absolute, complete and teetotal nuts."

"Any law says a cop has to be sane to be on the force?"

"What whirlwind, Sergeant?" the bazooka man was asking. Yancel started to tell him, forcefully, then deflated when he realized that no whirlwind was available.

"You wait," he told him, and turned to Pappy. "You!" he yelled. "You chased away that whirlwind. Get it back here."

Pete took out his notebook. "This is interesting, Yancel. Is it your professional opinion that a whirlwind can be ordered around like a trained dog? Is that the official position of the police department?"

"I—No comment! You button up, or I'll run you in."

"By all means. But you have that Buck Rogers cannon pointed so that, after the shell passes through the whirlwind, if any, it should end up just about at the city hall. Is this a plot to assassinate Hizzoner?"

Yancel looked around suddenly, then let his gaze travel an imaginary trajectory.

"Hey, you lugs!" he shouted. "Point that thing the other way. You want to knock off the Mayor?"

"That's better," Pete told the sergeant. "Now they have it trained on the First National Bank. I can't wait."

Yancel looked over the situation again. "Point it where it won't hurt nobody," he ordered. "Do I have to do all your thinking?"

"But, Sergeant—"

"Well?"

"You *point* it, Sergeant. We'll fire it."

Pete watched them. "Clarence," he sighed, "you stick around and get a pic of them loading it back into the car. That will be in about five minutes. Pappy and I will be in the Happy Hour Bar-Grill. Get a nice picture, with Yancel's features."

"Natch," said Clarence.

The next installment of OUR

FAIR CITY featured three cuts and was headed "Police Declare War on Whirlwind." Pete took a copy and set out for the parking lot, intending to show it to Pappy.

Pappy wasn't there. Nor was Kitten. He looked around the neighborhood, poking his nose in lunchrooms and bars. No luck.

He hearded back toward the *Forum* building, telling himself that Pappy might be shopping, or at a movie. He returned to his desk, made a couple of false starts on a column for the morrow, crumpled them up and went to the art department.

"Hey! Clarence!" Have you been down to the parking lot today?"

"Nah."

"Pappy's missing."

"So what?"

"Well, come along. We got to find him."

"Why?" But he came, lugging his camera.

The lot was still deserted, no Pappy, no Kitten—not even a stray breeze. Pete turned away.

"Come on, Clarence—say, what are you shooting now?"

Clarence had his camera turned up toward the sky. "Not shooting," said Clarence. "Light is no good."

"What was it?"

"Whirlwind."

"Huh? Kitten?"

"Maybe."

"Here, Kitten—come Kitten."

The whirlwind came back near him, spun faster, and picked up a piece of cardboard it had dropped. It whipped it around, then let him have it in the face.

"That's not funny, Kitten," Pete complained. "Where's Pappy?"

The whirlwind sidled back toward him. He saw it reach again for the cardboard. "No, you don't!" Pete cried and reached for it, too.

The whirlwind beat him to it. It carried it up some hundred feet and sailed it back. The card caught him edgewise on the bridge of the nose.

"Kitten!" Pete yelled. "Quit horsing around."

It was a printed notice, about six by eight inches. Evidently it had been tacked up; there were small tears at all four corners. It read: "The Ritz-Classic" and under that, "Room 2013, Single Occupancy $6.00, Double Occupancy $8.00." There followed a printed list of the house rules.

Pete stared at it and frowned. Suddenly he chucked it back at the whirlwind. Kitten immediately tossed it back in his face.

"Come on, Clarence," he said briskly. "We're going to the Ritz-Classic—room twenty-thirteen."

"Natch," said Clarence.

The Ritz-Classic was a colossal fleabag, favored by the bookie-and-madame set, three blocks away. Pete avoided the desk by using the basement entrance.

The elevator boy looked at Clarence's camera and said, "No,

you don't, Doc. No divorce cases in this hotel."

"Relax," Pete told him. "That's not a real camera. We peddle marijuana—that's the hay mow."

"Whyn't you say so? You hadn't ought to carry it in a camera. You make people nervous. What floor?"

"Twenty-one."

The elevator operator took them up non-stop, ignoring other calls. "That'll be two bucks. Special service."

"What do you pay for the concession?" inquired Pete.

"You gotta nerve to beef—with your racket."

They went back down a floor by stair and looked up room 2013. Pete tried the knob cautiously; the door was locked. He knocked on it—no answer. He pressed an ear to it and thought he could hear movement inside. He stepped back, frowning.

Clarence said, "I just remember something." He suddenly trotted away.

He returned quickly, with a red fire ax. "Now?" he asked Pete.

"A lovely thought, Clarence!

Not yet." Pete pounded and yelled, "Pappy! Oh, Pappy!"

A large woman in a pink coolie coat opened the door behind them. "How do you expect a party to sleep?" she demanded.

Pete said, "Quiet, madame! We're on the air." He listened. This time there were sounds of struggling and then, "Pete! Pe—"

"Now!" said Pete.

Clarence started swinging.

The lock gave up on the third swing. Pete poured in, with Clarence after him. He collided with someone coming out and sat down abruptly. When he got up he saw Pappy on a bed.

The old man was busily trying to get rid of a towel tied around his mouth.

Pete snatched it away. "Get 'em!" yelled Pappy.

"Soon as I get you untied."

"I ain't tied. They took my pants. Boy, I though you'd never come!"

"Took Kitten a while to make me understand."

"I got 'em," said Clarence. "Both of 'em."

"Where?" demanded Pete.

"Here," said Clarence proudly, and patted his camera.

Pete restrained his answer and ran to the door. "They went thataway," said the large woman, pointing.

Pete took out, skidded around the corner and saw an elevator door just closing.

Pete stopped, bewildered by the crowd just outside the hotel. He was looking uncertainly around when Pappy grabbed him.

"There!" That car!" The car Pappy pointed out was even then swinging out from the curb just beyond the rank of cabs in front of the hotel; with a deep growl it picked up speed, and headed away.

Pete yanked open the door of the nearest cab. "Follow that car!" he yelled.

They all piled in.

"Why?" asked the hackie.

Clarence lifted the fire ax. "Now?" he asked.

The driver ducked. "Forget it," he said. "It was just a yak." He let in his clutch.

The hack driver's skill helped them in the downtown streets, but the driver of the speeding car swung right on Third and headed for the river. They streamed across it, fifty yards apart, with traffic snarled behind them, and then were on the no-speed-limit freeway. The cabbie turned his head.

"Is the camera truck keeping up?" he asked.

"What camera truck?"

"Ain't this a movie?"

"Good grief, no! That car is filled with kidnapers. Faster!"

"A snatch? I don't want no part of it." He braked suddenly.

Pete took the ax and prodded the driver. "You catch 'em!"

The hack speeded up again but the driver protested, "Not in this

wreck. They got more power than me."

Pappy grabbed Pete's arm. "There's Kitten!"

"Where? Oh, never mind that now!"

"Slow down!" yelled Pappy. "Kitten, oh, Kitten—over here!"

The whirlwind swooped down and kept pace with them. Pappy called to it. "Here, baby! Go get that car! Up ahead—*get it!*"

Kitten seemed confused, uncertain. Pappy repeated it and she took off—like a whirlwind. She dipped and gathered a load of paper and trash as she flew.

They saw her dip and strike the car ahead, throwing paper in the face of the driver. The car wobbled. She struck again. The car veered, climbed the curb, richocheted against the crash rail, and fetched up against a lamp post.

FIVE MINUTES later Pete, having left Kitten, Clarence, and the fire ax to hold the fort over two hoodlums suffering from abrasion, multiple contusions and shock, was feeding a dime into a pay phone at the nearest filling station. He dialled long distance.

"Gimme the FBI's kidnap number," he demanded. "You know—the Washington, D.C., snatch number."

"My goodness," said the operator, "do you mind if I listen in?"

"Get me that number!"

"Right away!"

Within a few minutes a voice answered, "Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"Lemme talk to Hoover! Huh? Okay, okay—I'll talk to you. Listen this is a snatch case. I've got 'em on ice, for the moment, but unless you get one of your boys from your local office here pronto there won't be any snatch case—not if the city cops get here first. What?"

Pete quieted down and explained who he was, where he was, and the more believable aspects of the events that had led up to the present situation. The government man cut in on him as he was urging speed and more speed and assured him that the local office was already being notified.

Pete got back to the wreck just as Lieutenant Dumbrosky climbed out of a squad car. Pete hurried up.

"Don't do it, Dumbrosky," he yelled.

The big cop hesitated. "Don't do what?"

"Don't do anything. The FBI are on their way now—and you're already implicated. Don't make it any worse."

Pete pointed to the two gunsels; Clarence was sitting on one and resting the spike of the ax against the back of the other. "These birds have already sung. This town is about to fall apart. If you hurry, you might be able to get a plane for Mexico."

Dumbrosky looked at him. "Wise guy," he said doubtfully.

"Ask them. They confessed."

One of the hoods raised his head. "We was threatened," he announced. "Take 'em in, Lieutenant. They assaulted us."

"Go ahead," Pete said cheerfully. Take us all in—together. Then you won't be able to lose that pair before the FBI can question them. Maybe you can cop a plea."

"Now?" asked Clarence.

Dumbrosky swung around. "Put that ax down!"

"Do as he says, Clarence. Get your camera ready to get a picture as the G-men arrive."

"You didn't send for no G-men."

"Look behind you!"

A dark blue car slid quietly to a stop and four lean, brisk men got out. The first of them said. "Is there someone here named Peter Perkins?"

"Me," said Pete. "Do you mind if I kiss you?"

It was after dark but the parking lot was crowded and noisy. A stand for the new Mayor and distinguished visitors had been erected on one side, opposite it was a bandstand; across the front was a large illuminated sign: Home of Kitten—Honorary Citizen of our Fair City.

In the fenced-off circle in the middle Kitten herself bounced and spun and swayed and danced. Pete stood on one side of the circle with Pappy opposite him; at four-foot intervals around it children were posted.

"All set?" called out Pete.

"All set," answered Pappy.

Together, Pete, Pappy and the kids started throwing serpentine into the ring. Kitten swooped, gathered the ribbons up and wrapped them around herself.

"Confetti!" yelled Pete.

Each of the kids dumped a sackful toward the whirlwind—little of it reached the ground.

"Balloons!" yelled Pete Perkins. "Lights!"

Each of the children started blowing up toy balloons; each had a dozen different colors. As fast as they were inflated they fed them to Kitten. Floodlights and searchlights came on; Kitten was transformed into a fountain of boiling, bubbling color, several stories high.

"Now?" said Clarence.

"Now!"

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Sure, he did it. He had motive and hate and a gun. Only one thing was wrong. A guy doesn't risk the hot seat—to kill a dead man.

HALLOWE'EN IN JULY

by DICK ELLIS

DETECTIVE DOMINICK CORSI thought it looked like a stage set. Spotlights lit up a short portion of the alley and where the hazy, bluish white cones of light converged, there was the body.

It was a youngish man, maybe thirty, with a startled look on his upturned face and a large red blotch on the front of his shirt. Homocide squad detectives moved about this focus, casting misshapen shadows on the back walls of the buildings on either side of the trash-littered alley.

There was a murmur of voices, the soundless explosions of flashbulbs as a lab man took pictures.

Yeah, a stage set.

But this corpse wouldn't get up and walk away once the scene was played. He'd exit on the stretcher that two morgue-wagon attendants were pushing forward, urged on by a plump, fussy man from the coroner's office.

Stage set, nuts, Corsi thought irritably. For years he had been trying to rid himself of a streak of rather lurid imagination, inherited from his Sicilian ancestors.

Life, as he saw it every working day, was wild enough without adding the curse of imagination.

He turned his attention to the little group standing beside an open door. The door led into the backroom of a liquor store that fronted on the street to the east. The dead man had worked there until about forty-five minutes ago, ten o'clock in the evening.

Corsi moved over to listen to his squad commander, Lieutenant Blanchard, who was talking to a tow-headed, muscular kid wearing tee-shirt and slacks. He was the younger brother of the murdered man.

"I've told you all I know," he was saying wearily. He rubbed a hand over his face, winced as his fingers touched an angry red spot, the size of a half-dollar, on his right cheek.

"Yes, I know you talked with Detectives Corsi and Robinson here," the lieutenant agreed. "But I just arrived, and I'd like to hear the story from you, personally."

The kid sighed. "Okay. But can we go inside, sit down? I feel lousy."

Blanchard would have looked sympathetic, except he didn't have the face for it. He nodded.

While the kid and Pete Robinson went on through the alley door into the liquor store, Blanchard hung back for a quick word with Corsi.

Kenneth had stopped by the store where his older brother, Jack Avery, worked alone nights. This was just before ten o'clock. Jack was preparing to close up for the night.

The hold-up man came in almost on Kenneth's heels.

"He was about six feet tall and kind of skinny," Kenneth Avery said. "Had on a black shirt and pants, gloves, and one of these Hallowe'en masks—the kind that cov-

ers your whole head, you know?"

Blanchard nodded. "Go on, son."

The hold-up man didn't waste any time, Avery told them. He waggled a gun, demanded the money, which Jack Avery had already put in a canvas sack, preparatory to closing up, and also Avery's gun.

"You think he knew there was a gun under the counter?" Blanchard asked.

"He acted like it," Avery said. "In fact, he acted like he was familiar with the whole layout."

Corsi murmured, "Must have been, since he had his car parked in the alley right behind the store."

"Lot of trouble for little return," Pete Robinson rumbled. "He only got a little over a hundred bucks."

After getting the money sack and Avery's gun, the bandit forced the two brothers to walk through the store to the alley door. Jack unbolted the door and they went on into the alley. There was a car there, engine running—

"What kind of car?"

Kenneth Avery shook his head. "It was too dark out there to see much. It was a sedan. That's about all I saw. The lights were off. Besides, that's when this—this guy went crazy, or whatever it was."

He mopped sweat from his face with a muscular forearm, and went on, "All of a sudden, for no reason, he started cursing us. Especially Jack. He even called him by name. Then, just like that, he started shooting. Jack went down. I made a dive for the gun. Didn't know what else to do."

"That's how he got that burn on his cheek." Detective Robinson said. "Lucky he didn't get his head blown off."

"Muzzle blast nicked him," Corsi said.

"Anyway, I thought I'd had it," Avery said hoarsely. "I hit the ground and stayed there till I heard the car take off down the alley."

"Then what?"

"I got up and went over to Jack. He was sprawled out on his back there. He was dead—"

"Two number 38 slugs in the chest. Either would have killed him, according to the doctor," Corsi inserted.

"Then I came in here and called the cops," Avery finished. "After that, I—I think I passed out."

He fumbled a cigarette and lighter out of his shirt. His hands were shaking so badly he had trouble getting the lighter to work. The three detectives watched him.

"So the killer called your brother by name?" Blanchard asked, when Avery finally had his cigarette lit.

"Yes. It was real weird. Like he hated Jack's guts, for some reason. But there wasn't any reason. We hadn't given him any trouble."

"Well, you never know," Blanchard said.

"There've been a couple of liquor store robberies in the last week or so," Corsi said. "Could be the same man."

The lieutenant grunted. "The description fits, more or less. But anyone can buy a Hallowe'en mask. Even in July."

Corsi looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. The robber-killer had evidently got away clean. If he'd been tagged in the hour since the first alarm went out, they'd have heard about it by now.

"What I don't understand is why he used Avery's gun. He had one of his own," Peter Robinson said.

Corsi eyed the big detective with some disgust. He didn't care for Robinson, and knew the feeling was mutual. He snapped, "If you planned to kill a man, it wouldn't be a bad idea to use his gun, if you could get it, rather than your own. Now would it?"

Robinson scowled at him.

"Planned to kill him?" Kenneth Avery said, his voice rising. He blinked bloodshot eyes from one to another of the detectives. "You think—"

"Did your brother have any enemies?" Blanchard asked.

"Lord, no. Not that kind, anyway. That's crazy." Avery paused a moment, staring into space. Then he shook his head decisively. "No."

Blanchard didn't push it, for the moment. He'd much prefer to have a neat, sensible hold-up killing, if he could get it. There were many explanations how the bandit might have known Jack Avery by name.

It developed that Kenneth didn't have a way home. His brother was going to take him, since his own car was out of commission. Corsi volunteered for the job. He led Avery to the unmarked squad car parked outside.

"Appreciate it," Avery said, as they pulled away from the curb. "I don't have money for a taxi, and I wasn't looking forward to a long bus ride."

"No sweat," Corsi said. "They'll release your brother's car to you tomorrow, probably. Unless there's someone else?"

"No, we didn't have any relatives. Jack was married, but his wife died, just a couple of months ago."

Corsi braked for the intersection, then turned right toward the north side residential area. "What happened?"

"To his wife? She had this blood disease, leukemia," Avery said. "Rough business. She lingered for a year or more, and the hospital bills were murder. They didn't have any kind of insurance. It left Jack in debt up to his eyeballs."

Corsi glanced at the kid in the dim glow of the dashboard lights. "Sounds like your brother had a tough time, altogether."

"Yeah. And to end up like this —damn!"

They rode in silence for a few

blocks. It was a warm, cloudy summer night. A spatter of rain fell. Corsi turned on the windshield wipers.

He asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"Huh? Oh. I've been working on a construction job since June. Piling up enough loot to get me through another term at the University, I hope."

"You're still in college?"

Avery laughed without humor. "Yeah. I'm making a career out of it. Damn near twenty-five, and I still need another year's work to get my degree. The way I've had to do it is go to school a year, then hold down some lousy job long enough to get the money for another year."

Corsi grunted approvingly. "Good for you. Stay with it. I wish I'd have the brains to get a college education—"

"I just hope it's worth it," Avery muttered.

Another brief silence, then the kid said, "Talking about Marie—that was Jack's wife—made me think of something. I doubt if it means anything. But you were asking back there at the store; if Jack had any enemies."

"Yeah?"

"Well, there was this guy. Marie's first husband—she divorced him, not long before Jack met her, about four years ago. Anyway, according to Jack, this guy shot off his mouth quite a bit, claimed that Jack had taken Marie away from him, that kind of thing."

Corsi asked, "What's his name?"

"Larry Horton. I know Jack wrote to me not long after Marie died in May—I was in school then—and told me he'd had another run-in with Horton. Guy took a poke at him, as I remember. Then he was trying to say that Jack was responsible for Marie's death. A real nut."

"Was Jack worried about it, afraid of Horton?"

Avery snorted. "Jack was in the Army for a couple of years. He wasn't afraid of much of anything. Ah, I'm sure there's nothing to it."

Corsi wasn't so sure. In his business he'd long ago discovered that people murdered other people quite often because of real or imagined wrongs.

He asked, "You know this Larry Horton?"

"I've seen him around a few times. One of these thin, nervous guys, always puffing a cigarette. He didn't impress me a bit. Like Jack said, I got the idea that he was all talk, and nothing to back it up. A bum."

Avery didn't have any more to add. They reached the rooming-house where he was living—not too much better than a flop-house, from what Corsi could see of it—and he got out. The rain shower had ended.

Corsi leaned out his window to

say, "We'll be in touch with you in the morning. If you think of anything meanwhile, call headquarters."

Avery nodded, turned away. He slogged across the wet lawn toward the house. When he'd gone inside, Corsi put the squad car in gear and drove on.

"Larry Horton, huh?" he murmured. The name sounded vaguely familiar. He'd check it out when he got back downtown. That, and a couple of other items concerning other cases, should take him through until midnight, when he went off duty. Unless something new broke somewhere.

Which could happen. And probably would.

Downtown, he put the squad car in the garage beneath the dingy headquarters building, and went up to the detective bureau on the second floor.

He found Blanchard in his cubbyhole office at the rear of the homicide squadroom.

The lieutenant had talked with the liquor store owner after Corsi left to drive Avery home. The owner had said pretty much the same as Avery had told Dom Corsi. He hadn't known of any enemies that Jack Avery might have.

"Said Jack was very busted up when his wife died," the lieutenant said now. "Moved out of the apartment they'd been living in, to some hotel down near the store. I

guess that's why the two brothers weren't staying together."

The phone on Blanchard's desk rang. He picked it up, listened, then handed it to Corsi. "For you."

Corsi explained, "I stopped at Records on the way upstairs. Asked them to run a make for me."

He took the phone, listened a couple minutes. His dark brown, deceptively mild eyes widened.

"Okay. Thanks," he said. Slowly he returned the phone to its cradle.

"What's all that about?" Blanchard asked.

Corsi told him about the man named Larry Horton. "Turns out he's got a rap sheet long as your arm," Corsi added. "Yeah. As-

sault, burglary. Did time for armed robby—got out on parole about seven months ago. Nothing since then."

Blanchard took off his glasses, held them to the light, then thoughtfully cleaned the lenses on the tail of his necktie. "Maybe you've got something. Maybe Horton was kind of combining business with pleasure."

"Could be," Corsi said.

"You get an address on him? Good. Go have a chat with him. But for God's sake, don't bring him in unless you find enough evidence to nail him down." The lieutenant grimaced. "There's enough stories in the papers about police persecution of poor, helpless ex-cons."

Corsi got up. "Who'll I take with me?"

"Robinson is still at the liquor store, wrapping it up there. Take Jenkins. He's in the squad room."

He picked up Max Jenkins in the squad room and the two headed downstairs for the garage. Corsi explained briefly on the way.

Jenkins nodded. He seldom talked if he could help it.

They got the car and Corsi drove through the midnight city streets toward the address Records had given him for Larry Horton. It was on the north side. A light, warm drizzle was falling when they reached the address. It was a ramshackle frame house about in the middle of the block.

Corsi stopped a couple of houses down, squinted through the darkness. The city evidently believed that one street light every two blocks was plenty, out here. The house was dark. There was a car parked in the driveway beside it.

Max Jenkins got a talkative streak. "What now?"

"Cover the back," Corsi said. "I'll go in the front."

Silently, the two detectives left their car, padded along the wet grass bordering the sidewalk. When they reached the driveway, Corsi said softly, "Watch yourself. This bird may come out shooting."

Jenkins grunted. He went on past the car—a blue Ford sedan, Corsi noticed—and on toward the back of the house. Corsi tried the near door of the Ford. It wasn't locked. He eased the door open. He flicked on his pen-light long enough to read the registration-slip on the steering-wheel post.

"Lawrence Horton. Age twenty-seven, height six-feet-one, weight one fifty five." Close enough to Avery's description of the masked killer.

Corsi let the door ease shut. He turned to the silent house. Jenkins should be set by now.

There was no porch, only three rickety steps leading up to the front door. Corsi climbed them. He took his gun from its belt-holster, put it in the side-pocket of his jacket, and rapped on the door.

Silence. He rapped again.

From inside came the soft creak of floor boards, then a voice, "That you?"

"Yeah," Corsi muttered. "Open up."

A key turned in a lock, and the door swung open. "About time you showed— Hey, who the hell—"

"Inside, Horton. I'm a police officer. I'll show you my ID in a second—no, don't try it. Corsi pulled the gun from his pocket as the other man tensed.

Larry Horton slowly backed into a smelly, dimly lit room with windows covered by tight-fitting shades.

He was tall and skinny, with a lined face and eyes that glared now in sheer panic.

If Corsi had any doubts, they dwindled as he studied Horton. The man was scared spitless.

"Listen, what is this?" Horton gasped.

Corsi called to Jenkins to come on in. A moment later he showed up at the front door. He grunted.

"Take a look around, Max, why don't you?" Corsi said.

Jenkins grunted again, and headed for a door at the back of the frowsy living room.

"I haven't done anything," Horton said. "You got no right to bust in here—"

"Uh huh. Where were you two hours ago, about ten o'clock?"

"Right here, sleeping."

"Haven't been out all evening, I suppose?"

Horton shook his head. "No!"

Now Max Jenkins appeared in the doorway behind Horton. The detective had his right sleeve rolled up and his hand and wrist were wet. He held a plastic bag containing a couple of items, one of them heavy.

"A Hallowe'en mask and a gun," Jenkins said.

Horton shivered, slowly turned his head to look over his shoulder. He swayed. He looked as if he might faint.

"Where were they?" Corsi asked.

"Water tank of the toilet," Jenkins said. "As usual—"

Horton kicked out wildly, his foot catching Corsi on the arm, knocking his gun aside. The detective staggered back. Horton plowed into him, trying frantically to reach the front door and the night outside. Corsi managed to shove him back into the room. Horton fought like a wild man.

Then Jenkins stepped up behind him and buried a fist in his kidneys. That was that. Horton went down to his knees, whimpering in pain.

"Thanks," Corsi panted. He sucked a skinned knuckle. "What I get for being careless."

Between them, the detectives got Horton to his feet, put cuffs on him, then let him sag down into a chair. He kept shaking his head and moaning. "How'd you know? How'd you get on to me? I thought

—" He broke off, moaned some more.

Corsi was examining Jenkins' find. A hood-like mask of rubber, a .45 automatic, a wad of bills. And three rolls of coins, neatly stamped, Happy Times Liquor Store.

"Wasn't that one of the places that were knocked off last week?" Corsi said.

Jenkins nodded. "Think it is."

"Well, well. How about that, Horton?"

Horton said dully, "What the heck—I'm through."

"Yeah. You want to tell us about tonight?"

"I told you. I haven't been out of the house. I was expecting a friend over for a few drinks. A dame I know."

"Sure you were. But what about Jack Avery?"

Horton lifted his eyes. He frowned at Corsi. "Avery? The jerk who married my ex-wife? What about him?"

Jenkins gave a snort.

"You don't know anything about his getting killed?" Corsi asked. "Come on, man. You've had it. Don't make us dig it out of you. You went over there tonight, to the store where he worked. You robbed him, then put a couple of slugs in him. Tell us—"

"I never—you guys are crazy," Horton yelled. "Sure, I knocked over a liquor store or two, the last few days. But this business about Jack Avery—I don't know what you're talking about!"

Corsi sighed. "Have it your way. We'll talk about it downtown. On your feet."

"Wait a minute," Horton protested. "Listen, I didn't have any use for Jack Avery. He stole my wife while I was in the jug and couldn't do anything about it. Then he let her die, because he was too damn cheap to get her the care she needed. But hell, I didn't kill the guy. I ain't even seen him in months. Honest!"

Corsi stared at the sweating man. Either Horton was leveling, or he was one heck of an actor. But then—

Some ideas he'd had earlier, and dismissed, came back to Corsi now. But what possible motive could there be?

He asked slowly, "Do you know Kenneth Avery?"

"Why?" Horton said.

"He's the one who blew the whistle on you."

Horton blinked once, twice. His haggard face flushed. He exploded, "That lousy little—"

"So you do know him? Kenneth Avery?"

"Hell, yes, I know him. He was my partner on those liquor store jobs. Of all the dirty—"

Stripped of frequent outbursts of anger, Horton's story was that he and Kenneth Avery had become friends when Kenneth was in the city one summer a few years

ago. In fact, Horton said, it was Kenneth who had told him of Jack Avery's neglect of his wife. This present summer, Kenneth had turned up again.

One thing led to another, and they ended up pulling an occasional hold-up, Kenneth staying in the car with the engine running, while Larry Horton did the actual job, and splitting the take afterwards.

"He wanted to get hold of enough money to get him through college," Horton spat. "A real brain."

"You think he'd kill his own brother?" Corsi put in.

Horton growled, "From what you've told me, I think the bum would do anything. Putting the finger on me like that, after all I've done for him!"

Corsi and Jenkins exchanged glances.

But why should Kenneth have set up this elaborate make-believe, including framing Horton for the killing? What motive could the kid have? Certainly not the hundred dollars taken from the liquor store. He couldn't be that hungry.

Suddenly Horton gave a muttered oath. "I bet that's it."

"What?" Corsi asked.

"A couple of times, Ken mentioned to me about this big insurance policy his brother had, this GI insurance. Ten thousand bucks. He, Ken, was telling me all the big deals he could swing if he had a hunk of that cash."

"Was the insurance made out to him?"

Horton shook his head. "No, it was to Marie."

"Only Marie's dead," Corsi mused. "So unless Jack changed the policy, the money will go to Kenneth, as the next of kin."

It made sense, if you accepted the idea of a man willing to kill his brother for ten thousand dollars. Horton made a beautiful pigeon. Probably Kenneth Avery had expected or hoped that Horton would panic and try to escape, and get himself conveniently killed in the process.

It had almost happened just that way. If someone like Pete Robinson, say, had been with Corsi, instead of the phlegmatic Jenkins, Larry Horton might very well be dead now, instead of nursing a bruised kidney.

"Yeah," Corsi said aloud. "Horton, we're taking you in on suspicion of armed robbery and investigation. Maybe you had a piece of this action tonight; maybe you didn't. We'll find out. Where's your phone?"

Horton said wearily, "It's lying over there on the floor. Must have knocked it off the table, when you guys were beating me up."

"Police brutality, huh?" Corsi said, walking to pick up the phone. "Save it for the reporters. They'll love it."

He set the phone on its cradle, then took it up and dialed headquarters.

In a moment he had Lieutenant Blanchard on the line. While he waited, he rapidly put his ideas in order.

Kenneth Avery had gone to the liquor store, as he said. He went inside, waited until his brother was alone. Then he took the gun from under the counter, forced Jack into the alley, and shot him in cold blood.

That red mark on his cheek he'd made himself—by holding a match or a cigarette-lighter to the flesh, perhaps. A careful examination would solve that. Young Kenneth hadn't been expecting any examination at all, so it was very doubtful he would risk actually firing a gun that close to his face.

Blanchard came on the line. He sounded excited. "That you, Corsi? Where the hell you been? I've been trying to get you on your car radio, and—"

"Max and I have Horton. We're at his place."

"Funny. Tried to phone you there, but I kept getting a busy signal. Listen—"

"I'll explain later," Corsi interrupted. "Right now—"

"Hold it a minute, Dom. I have another call."

Corsi sighed, rolled his eyes toward the mildewed ceiling. Behind him he could hear Horton talking.

"Wasn't like Ken was studying to be a doctor or lawyer," Horton growled. "You know what he wanted to be? An actor. No kidding. He was taking all these expensive drama courses at the college."

Max Jenkins grunted.

Corsi shifted the phone from one ear to the other. He fleetingly remembered his earlier notion in the alley behind the liquor store. He'd thought it looked like a stage set. He hadn't been far wrong, after all.

Well, if it worked out, it'd be a good pinch. Worth a citation. At least a citation.

Now Blanchard's voice boomed "Dom? Come on in, you and Max. We have the killer—Kenneth Avery. And we got him nailed down tight."

Corsi glared at a rip in the wallpaper near him. "What!"

"Yeah. Strange how it worked out. Pete Robinson took a last look along that alley behind the store. Way down at the far end, jammed under a pile of bricks, he found the money-sack from the store. The money still in it, and a pair of gloves. He brought it in, and damned if there weren't a set of

Kenneth Avery's prints on the sack. We'd taken his prints earlier, at the store, though I didn't think they'd be of any use. Goes to show you, huh?"

Corsi said, "Yeah."

"Brought Avery in here, and he split right off. I got the idea he'd used up his supply of bluff already. A doctor is looking at that burn on his face right now. It wasn't caused by any muzzle-blast of a gun."

"How did Robinson find that money sack?" Corsi asked.

Blanchard laughed heartily. "He fell over it. Or rather, the bricks it was hidden under. But what did you want to report, Dom?"

"It'll keep," Corsi sighed. He hung up.

"Fell over it," he said to the ripped wall-paper. Citation, yeah. Some days it didn't pay to get out of bed.

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DEATH CREEPS BY NIGHT

Only two held the key to a rich old lady's murder. The killer—and an ugly, snarling old tomcat . . .

by PAT CORY

INSPECTOR J. D. DURAND parked his car in a red zone and slipped from behind the wheel. He walked lightly up the steps of an old apartment building.

The uniformed officer was waiting for him at the door.

"This may be a wasted trip for you, Inspector, but it just doesn't look right."

The officer led the way through a dark hall and down a short flight of steps. "Woman dead in her room down in the basement apartment. Agnes Rogers. She owns and runs

this place. Her nephew came down about a half-hour ago and couldn't get an answer. He went around back and looked in, saw her there in the bedroom and called me."

J. D. listened carefully, frowning slightly. "Think it's something for us, Frank?"

Officer Franks shrugged. "I just don't know. The nephew said she had cirrhosis and a bad heart. He wanted to call her doctor but I told him we'd better check it out with the department first."

He stopped at a broken door. "This is it. I had to bust the panel out to get the night chain off. Back door is chained too; we tried it first."

The door opened into a dimly lit living room-kitchenette combination. J. D.'s eyes adjusted to the pale light filtering through the two dirty, curtainless windows. Both windows, he noted, were locked and barred.

The room reeked of many sour odors coming from the clutter of empty gin bottles and overflowing ashtrays scattered about the room. The stench made him wince. J. D. turned sharply at a sudden movement. A large gray cat had leaped to the back of a chair and sat staring at them.

J. D. reached to pat the animal's head. The cat slashed its claws across his hand and sprang to the grease-spotted couch. It ignored the intruders and calmly washed its forepaws.

"Ugly beast, isn't he?" J. D. held his hand for a moment.

"Some of those toms are like that." Officer Franks led the way to the bedroom.

The body of the heavy woman sprawled on the bed looked as though it belonged to the room. Her reddish hair showed an oily film of gray at its roots and the faded nightgown she wore appeared as though it hadn't been washed in weeks.

She lay on her side, a grotesque mountain sprawled amid dirty trailing bedclothes. Cat hair covered the blanket and pillows. J. D. saw no blood and from what he could see of the half-covered body, there were apparently no bruises.

"Like I said, Inspector, I don't know just what it is. A feeling—you know?"

J. D. knew. No signs of violence on an old woman in a locked room, but still there was a feeling about the place that wasn't right. He couldn't describe it, but after twenty years on the force, he recognized it.

He walked to the door in the rear wall of the room. It was chained securely. Set in the door at the bottom was a small hinged panel. J. D. pushed it with the toe of his polished shoe. It swung out and back. A special door for the cat to come and go without disturbing the old lady.

He knelt down and studied it carefully. It wasn't much bigger

than the cat and certainly too far from the lock for anyone to have reached up and unlatched the door. The one window in the room was barred just as the living room windows were.

J. D. rose, ran a hand through his thick white hair and walked back to the living room. "I'll call the lab boys and Doc. Maybe they can come up with something. They better. So far all we have is that damned cat." J. D. phoned in, then turned to the officer. "Know anything about the tenants?"

Officer Franks produced a small green notebook. "Got it from the nephew. There's two floors above this with one apartment on each. First floor is an old guy named Harold Lubek who works downtown at one of the banks. He's been here about fifteen years. Second floor is the nephew, George Rogers."

J. D.'s eyebrows lifted. "Saving that little tidbit, eh?" He knew George Rogers. Everyone on the force knew him. Rogers had worked a short time with a private investigation agency, been fired and had started his own agency.

He'd been suspected of every kind of illegality in the book and had gone before the Board several times. Rogers was a shrewd and cautious operator though, and lack of concrete evidence had prevented legal action against him.

"At least we've got something besides a grouchy cat." They stood in silence for a moment. The cat stalked regally to the broken door and stood staring at them in silent demand. J. D. opened the door and it walked out. "Good riddance!"

The small, dark-haired man coming down the steps looked up sharply.

"A hell of a greeting," he said.

J. D. looked up at Doc Stein. "Didn't see you, Doc. How did you get here so fast? I just called in."

"My office called. I was only a couple blocks away."

J. D. stepped back to let the doctor enter. "It's in the bedroom."

Doc stopped suddenly. "My God, this place hadn't been cleaned in years. Anybody could die here just from lack of fresh air." He scowled at the dirt-encrusted rugs and furniture. "Cat hair all over the place. Probably start up my asthma." He stamped angrily into the bedroom.

J. D. followed him. Doc Stein spoke as he examined the body. "Picture boys been here yet?"

"O. K. I won't move her." He turned to J. D. "No bruises or blood. I see you had to bust in. How come you're in on this?"

"Just a feeling Frank had. I've got it now too. What can you say about her, Doc?"

"She's dead!" the little man snapped irritably.

"We figured."

"Maybe eight to twelve hours. I can pin it down after the P. M.—maybe."

"Any ideas about the cause?"

Doc grunted. "How the hell should I know? I'm a doctor, not a crystal gazer. You want instant answers, get a second-year med student!"

Technicians arrived and began snapping pictures, measuring and dusting. J. D. and Doc Stein walked into the living room. "You can have her as soon as the boys finish."

Doc took a neat white handkerchief from his pocket and sneezed. He glared at J. D. "I knew it—asthma. I'll wait outside till they're through." He turned and left, his stiff back clearly accusing J. D. of complete responsibility for his asthmatic attack.

Officer Franks said, "Take a look at this, Inspector."

J. D. joined him at the littered, scarred coffee table. The officer pointed to a worn looking bankbook. "Seems kind of funny for a bank book to be around a place like this."

J. D. signaled the fingerprint man.

"Dust this, will you, I want to have a look at it."

When the technician finished, J. D. picked up the book, opened it and whistled softly. He showed it to Officer Franks. "Not many people have a balance of $13,400."

Officer Franks looked about the clutter of the room in amazement, "And living like this."

"Well, not much more we can do till Doc makes his report. Put a seal on the place when they're all through here, will you, Frank?"

Doc Stein brought his report to J. D. a little after two o'clock. He dropped the papers on J. D.'s neat desk. "Here it is."

"Why don't you tell me about it and I can go over the details later."

"Jaquemot Dorian Durand, I never met such a lazy slob."

"You know it takes a code expert to crack that cryptogram you call writing."

Doc sighed and sat down. "Why the city will hire a pack of illiterates I'll never understand." He picked up the papers. "She had a severe case of cirrhosis of the liver and a bad heart. Couldn't have lived much more than a year, if that long."

"But somebody got impatient?"

"She was chloroformed. The toxic fumes of chloroform affect the liver. In her case, it wouldn't have taken much."

"Could the fumes have been pumped into the room?"

"I doubt it. Would have taken gallons of the stuff to do it that way."

Doc took off his glasses and began polishing them. "I think I need new glasses. Astigmatism is getting worse."

"Any suggestions on how she got those fumes?"

Doc smiled wickedly. "The cat?"

J. D. took his key ring and absently tossed it from hand to hand.

"If some was spilled by the bed, would that have done it?"

"She would have had to practically have laid in it. The stuff evaporates pretty fast."

"We'll let that go for now. What time did she die?"

"Between midnight and two this morning."

A light tap on the door preceded a tall uniformed young man. "Here are the technician's reports and a few things they picked up in the room, Inspector."

"Thanks, Pat." J. D. turned back to Doc. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"She must have been just about unconscious from alcohol when she got the fumes. Probably was in no condition to struggle—maybe never even woke up. Doesn't seem to be much in her medical history. I have it all in the report." Doc sneezed and left, muttering angrily.

J. D. looked over the diagrams and photographs first. After careful computations of angles he was convinced no one could have reached the bed by any means from the cat exit. The exit was too far from the foot of the bed for anyone to have seen the victim from that point, much less reached her with some object.

One of the large envelopes contained three more bank books and a copy of Agnes Rogers' will. The bank books brought the total to $76,000.

J. D. laid them aside and read the will. It left all the money to her nephew. But a special condition was attached. He would get the money only if he remained at the house and took care of the cat for the rest of its life.

Apparently Agnes had not had unlimited faith in her nephew as a caretaker, as the condition stated that if the cat died of anything but natural causes, including accidents, the money would revert to her tenant, Mr. Lubek.

J. D. wondered if both men knew of the will's contents. He chuckled and thought probably the old girl would have left the entire estate directly to the cat if she hadn't been afraid the will would be contested.

He got up and set his hat at a precise angle on his white hair and left.

J. D. rang the bell of the apartment on the first floor of Agnes Rogers' house. The door was opened a few inches and a pale faced man with silvery hair peered out at him. J. D. flipped open his badge holder. "Police officer, sir. Are you Mr. Harold Lubek?"

"Yes." The door didn't move.

"I'd like to come in a few minutes and talk with you, Mr. Lubek."

The silvery head nodded. The door opened.

J. D. removed his hat as he entered, "I'm Inspector Durand."

Harold Lubek was a small, el-

derly man. His erect bearing was beginning to slump a little. They entered a spotlessly clean living room, furnished comfortably in leather and walnut. "Sit down, Inspector Durand."

Lubek indicated the couch as he took the chair, reached for a pipe, which he filled slowly and carefully. "I was reading," he nodded to the open book on the footstool. "*The Illiad.* You like Greek drama, Inspector?"

"The later period. I have most of Plato and all of Aristotle."

Lubek's pale, lined face lost most of its austerity when he smiled. "Of course. The logical mind. You naturally would prefer the later period." He drew on the pipe, was satisfied it was going and continued, "The romance and philosophy are for the very young and the very old. But you came to talk of Mrs. Rogers."

J. D. nodded. "Yes. She was murdered, Mr. Lubek."

Lubek stiffened. "I thought she had a heart attack."

"The killer hoped it would look that way. When did you last see Mrs. Rogers?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I stopped by her apartment to drop off some groceries. I sometimes pick up things for her when I go down. She hates—hated to leave the house. She was something of a recluse."

"Was there anything unusual about her or your visit?"

Lubek paused a moment before answering. "No. She had been drinking. I could tell she was in for a long session of it. I just left the things and didn't stay. Mrs. Rogers was—well, she could be very unpleasant when she drank."

"In what way?"

"The usual ways. She became loud, sometimes maudlin."

"You didn't see her again last night?"

"No."

"Were you here all evening?"

"Yes. I had dinner and read until around nine-thirty. Puttered about a bit and went to bed just after ten."

"Did you hear anything downstairs any time last night?"

"Before I went to bed I heard her moving about. She often bumped into things. Sometime after I'd gone to sleep I was awakened by a yell from Mrs. Rogers."

Noting J. D.'s sharp look of interest, he hurried on, "But that wasn't unusual, Inspector. When she drank she often muttered and sometimes yelled and screamed down there."

"About what time was that?"

"I don't really know. I had been asleep. I heard the yell and went back to sleep almost immediately. I'd guess it was sometime after midnight, but I can't be sure."

J. D. made a few angular squibs in his notebook. "What about George Rogers? Did you see or hear anything of him?"

"These walls are like cardboard.

The way they build apartments—there ought to be laws."

J. D. lived in an apartment too and he agreed silently with Lubek.

"Rogers went out about nine. He's a heavy-footed chap. Thunders up and down the stairs all the time. I can't be too certain of the time he came back. It was very late, though."

"Was it before or after you were awakened by Mrs. Rogers' yell?"

"After. But I don't know how long."

"What about Mrs. Rogers? Can you tell me something more about the sort of person she was? Do you know any of her friends or people who came to see her?"

Lubek puffed on the pipe a moment. "As I said, she drank heavily and when she was drunk she was loud and rather vulgar. She and her nephew got into some pretty hot arguments, usually over money. I don't recall ever seeing anyone come to visit her."

He looked at J. D. and his voice was soft. "In the fifteen years I've lived here, I never knew of a visitor. She was a lonely old woman, Inspector."

J. D. nodded encouragingly.

The old man continued. "She had no one to talk to except the cat. He's a friendly old thing she's had ten or eleven years. He always slept on her pillow. At first I used to try to get her to eat, hoping she wouldn't drink so much."

He raised his hand and let it drop. "It was useless, so I didn't interfere any more after a while. Sometimes she'd go for days like that. Then I'd feed the cat because she'd forget. I felt sorry for her, but I really didn't know her very well. I don't think anyone really did."

"Did you know she had a substantial amount of money?"

"I never really thought about it. Did she?"

J. D. nodded. "Do you happen to know the provisions of her will?"

"No."

J. D. rose. "That will be all for now, Mr. Lubek. If something else occurs to me, I may want to talk with you again. If you want to reach me, here's my number." He gave the old man his card and left.

J. D. walked upstairs and knocked on George Rogers' door. It was opened by a fat man with sparse dark hair. The heavy double chins quivered when he spoke. "Ah, Inspector Durand, come in."

J. D. followed Rogers into a cluttered living room only slightly cleaner than his aunt's had been.

"I'm surprised to see you, J. D." The man dropped heavily into a threadbare chair.

"Why, Georgi Agnes Rogers was murdered."

Rogers' expression revealed nothing as he said, "I thought the gin finally got her."

"It would have, but somebody couldn't wait. Any idea who?"

George Rogers spread his fat hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"None. She could be pretty mean when she was on a binge."

A quick flash of gray movement caught J. D.'s eye. A cat had sprung lightly to the top of Rogers' chair. The fat man jumped and brushed at the animal. "Get down." The cat darted its claws at the hand, drew blood and spat. It sprang to the floor. "It's Agnes'. She always let him on all the furniture. I thought I'd better take care of it until I can take it down to the pound."

"You never read your aunt's will, did you, Rogers?"

Rogers looked startled. "Will? I never knew she had one."

"Just thought you'd get the whole works automatically?"

"I guess so. There aren't any other relatives. What's this about a will?"

"We found a copy of it downstairs." J. D. looked at the man a moment then went on. "You'll find out soon enough anyway. The money goes to you only if you stay here and take good care of the cat."

The look of surprise on Rogers' face was almost comic. J. D. went on, "If anything happens to that cat, you're out."

"I'll be damned!"

"I understand you quarreled a good deal with your aunt."

"That doesn't mean anything. When she hit the bottle she couldn't get along with anyone. Actually I sort of liked the old dame."

J. D. said, "Where were you last night?"

"I had some work to do downtown so I went back to my office around nine-thirty. Stayed there till about two, had something to eat and got back here around three."

J. D. took out his key ring and idly tossed it in one hand. "No one saw you, I suppose?"

"Nope. Except in the diner around two-thirty." Rogers' fat jowles quivered in a chuckle. "I didn't know I'd need an alibi."

"$75,000 and whatever other property besides this house is a lot of motive, especially for a man that likes money as well as you do, Georgie."

"Maybe," the man shrugged again and his sharp eyes glinted. "Not enough to get an indictment when you can't show any opportunity, though. An officer had to break in, as I recall." When J. D. didn't comment, Rogers continued.

"You will find I was a devoted nephew in spite of our little family spats. Brought her gin when she ran out. Last week I even fixed a window pane for her. If you think that wasn't something to see! Me teetering on a kitchen chair with her cat winding around my legs and the old lady yelling at me to be careful."

"Did you see her yesterday at all?"

"Just when I dropped off the gin. Agnes didn't like to go out."

"What time did you bring it?"

"Around three in the afternoon."

"I guess that's about it for now, Rogers. I'll be talking to you again." J. D. looked hard at the fat man. You can count on it."

It was about eight the next morning when J. D. received a phone call from Harold Lubek. The old man's voice was tense as he said, "I killed Agnes Rogers' cat, Inspector."

J. D. was instantly alert. "How did it happen?"

The voice on the other end of the line shook. "About an hour after you left George Rogers came down here and told me I would have to move. He was giving me a month's notice. I was very upset. I've been here a long time and, well, I just didn't expect this.

"Finally I decided to go out and see my sister. Her husband is a real estate broker and I thought he might know of some place. As I said, I was terribly upset and I didn't even see the cat at all. He got under the wheel as I was backing out of the garage." There was a long pause. "I ran over him. He was dead when I got out of the car."

"Does George Rogers know about it?"

There was a deep sigh on the other end of the line.

"Yes. I never saw a man so utterly mad. I didn't think he was that devoted to the cat. He says I did it deliberately—something about his aunt's will . . ."

J.D. could imagine Rogers' feelings. $75,000 plus out the window.

"Yes. I know about that."

"I wouldn't have hurt that cat on purpose, Inspector. Why would anyone do a thing like that?"

J.D. didn't tell him. "Is the cat still there?"

"No. George called someone to dispose of it."

"I guess there is nothing more that can be done. Thanks for calling me, Mr. Lubek."

"I wouldn't have bothered you but Rogers insisted that it had something to do with Mrs. Rogers' will."

"Yes. You were right to call. Thank you."

Within an hour George Rogers stormed into J.D.'s office. He repeated the story Lubek had told, his usually pale face almost livid with rage.

"I want you to investigate this, Inspector!"

J.D. leaned back in his chair. "Cat deaths don't usually come under the heading of homicide."

"You know he killed that cat so he'd get the money?"

"He said it was an accident. Accidents do happen."

George almost spat. "Not such convenient ones."

"That's just how we feel about your aunt's murder. It was very convenient for you, Rogers."

"Look, I've talked to my aunt's lawyer and he told me that if Lubek deliberately killed the cat, I'll still get the money—something

about Agnes' intention in making the will."

"Be pretty hard to actually prove he did it deliberately. I understand you had him all upset about moving."

"I never did like that old man. It's my place now and I can kick him out if I want."

"He said the cat got under the wheels before he even knew it was there."

"He was upset! I took three sleeping pills and was still awake most of the night."

"If that's all you have to say, Rogers, I have work to do."

Rogers slammed out. "He won't get away with it! If Agnes was killed, he probably did it and planned to kill the cat too."

J.D. had been considering that possibility since Lubek's telephone call. If Rogers couldn't prove Lubek killed the cat deliberately, Lubek now was in line for Agnes' estate. It was a very "fortunate" accident and J.D. had a natural suspicion of such convenience—especially involving a cat that had been raised right there and should have been pretty adept at staying out of the way of cars. A city cat either learns quickly to watch out for automobiles or it doesn't get to be eleven years old.

J.D. leaned back in the chair and tossed his key ring from hand to hand for a long time. Then he sat up abruptly.

"That's it!" he said to the empty room. He got up and hurried to Doc's office.

Doc looked up from the neat report form he was filling with his illegible scrawl. "J.D. are you still hunting murderous cats?" Stein asked.

"Yeah, wise guy. That's exactly what I'm looking for." He grinned and sat on the corner of a white table. "I want your professional opinion on a theory."

Doc looked at him irritably. "Get your germ-ridden pants off that table and sit in a chair!"

J.D. sat on the uncomfortable straight chair Doc kept to discourage lingerers. "Could someone soak a cat in chloroform and send it into the room knowing it would lie down next to the old lady and kill her—especially if she was too drunk to notice?"

Doc took off his glasses and polished them thoughtfully. "I suppose so."

J.D. smiled broadly. "That's how it was done. You were right, Doc. The cat killed her."

Doc leaned back and put his glasses back on. "What makes you think a ten pound cat is so much more immune to chloroform than a one hundred eighty pound sick woman?"

J.D.'s black eyebrows wrinkled in a frown. "Couldn't the cat possibly have survived?"

"Not possibly, unless he was wearing a gas mask—which I imagine even city employees would

have been bright enough to notice and call to your attention."

"Couldn't it have had some sort of shot? Something?"

"Nope. If the fumes were strong enough to kill the woman they would have had to kill the cat too."

"Damn!" J.D. stood up and jammed his hands into his pockets. "It's got to be that way. That cat was the only thing that could have gotten in or out of that room."

"Well, it didn't work that way. Anaesthetics are effective in direct ratio to weight. What would kill a one hundred eighty pound woman would kill a cat eighteen times over. Besides, if you dunked a cat in chloroform, it would burn his skin —he'd raise hell"

J.D. looked at Doc sourly.

Doc smiled unperturbed by J.D.'s scowl. "These tricky amateurs get you, don't they? Now a professional, he does it neat and quick. No question of how. Of course then he leaves the state and is never heard of again. Guess you can't have everything."

"The cat was killed this morning. Lubek ran over it."

"Why? Didn't he like its ugly disposition?"

"I'm wondering just how much he knew about Agnes Rogers' will and when he knew it."

"Could you wonder in your own office? I have seven of these reports to get out by noon. Not all of us working for the city can just sit around tossing our key rings and draw our pay." He picked up the pen and rubbed his hand, "I think I'm getting arthritis."

J.D. returned to his own office and glowered into space for a while. He reviewed the reports and his notes. He added some squibs about the cat's death and Doc's statements.

Something Doc had said nagged the back of his mind. Something about not liking the cat's ugly disposition. That was it.

He sat a few minutes longer, recalling his interviews with Rogers' and Lubek and sorting bits and scraps of memory. He reached for the phone.

"Pat, I want you to find out who picked up the dead cat at Rogers' place— Probably the Health Department. Find it and bring it in. Then call the garbage pickup people and order a special pick-up within a fifteen block radius of Rogers' place. Switch me back to the operator, I want to get hold of Agnes Rogers' lawyer."

He waited impatiently while the call was being put through to Charles Martell. Finally the lawyer was on the line. "Yes, Inspector. What can I do for you?"

"We're investigating Agnes Rogers' death and we have a copy of her will dated two years ago. Was that the only will she had?"

"Yes, as far as I know. She talked to me a few days ago about making a new one, but she never got around to it."

"I understand George Rogers called you . . ."

"Yes, last night."

"Is it true that if Lubek deliberately killed the cat he couldn't inherit?"

"Yes. Mrs. Rogers' intention was clearly to provide for her cat. If a conditional legatee killed it, I think the court would void his legacy if it was done deliberately."

"What would happen to the money?"

"It would probably go to Rogers, as originally devised. Or, if the court voided the whole will, he would take as the next of kin as though there had been no will."

"What would have happened if the cat died before the old lady and she hadn't made a new will?"

"Probably the whole will would be void and her nephew would still take the estate as though there had been no will."

"Rogers knows all this, that if he can prove Lubek killed the cat, he'll get the money anyway?"

"Yes. I explained it to him last night."

"Thank you."

J.D. hung up and smiled happily. After four hours of unpleasant checking of garbage and two more hours of hurrying an irritable Doc Stein through several post mortems on dead cats, J.D. ordered George Rogers brought in.

When Rogers arrived, J.D. gave him the required warning that he need not say anything, that any statement might be used against him, and that he could have an attorney present. Rogers waved this aside contemptuously.

"We've done some checking, Rogers. Some interesting things have turned up. We got that cat you had the health department pick up, just before they destroyed it."

"So? It was run over. Lubek did that."

"Right. But I got to wondering why a cat would be so careless as to get run over in its own garage."

"I told you, he did that on purpose!"

"I doubt it. It was an accident. But the reason it happened is that cat wasn't used to that garage or traffic. He was also not more than three years old." J.D. paused. Rogers pale face went white. He said nothing.

J.D. glanced at a report on his desk. "The city pound said a man giving the name of James Williams bought a big gray tom cat two days ago. This Mr. Williams, a fat man, as the lady recalled, seemed quite positive that it had to be a gray tom.

"They only had one and he took it. The people at the pound told Mr. Williams the cat had been picked up in the country by some people who were going to keep it as a pet. But it was too mean. They turned it into the pound. Mr. Williams didn't seem to care whether or not it was mean, just so it was big and gray."

Rogers still said nothing so J.D. continued. "Agnes Rogers' cat was old and friendly. He always slept with her. You even mentioned his winding himself around your legs. But this cat had scratched me—and you—and was neither old nor friendly."

"You still haven't got anything except a dead cat that you don't happen to think was my aunt's."

"You doused Agnes' cat in chloroform after putting it into a harness on a long rope. You knew the old lady was in bed, too drunk to move, and that the cat would jump right up on the pillow as it always did so you shoved it through the panel and it did just that. When you were sure your aunt was dead you just hauled the dead cat out and shoved in the new one."

"What makes you think a strange cat would have stayed there all night? He'd have found his way out through the panel."

"Not if he was almost anesthetized from sleeping pills. You mentioned you do have sleeping pills, didn't you?"

The voice was higher pitched now. "That doesn't mean I did it. Anyone could have. Lubek . . ."

"No dice, Georgie. Only the killer had any reason to make sure he got hold of the cat as soon as I let him out. That was another thing—that cat waited to be let out. If it had been Agnes' cat it would have used the panel.

"It had to be you. You had to make sure Lubek didn't see the new cat. It wouldn't have fooled anyone who knew the original. Not knowing about your aunt's will, you thought you'd just bring it back to the Pound. When you found you were stuck with it, you had to get Lubek to move as soon as possible. That's why you told him to get out of the place."

"This is all just theory. You have no proof."

"We found your aunt's cat in a garbage pail three blocks from the house. It had chloroform burns on its skin and it had died of the fumes, the same as Agnes Rogers. There enough hairs around your aunt's place to identify the cat. It will take a little leg work, but we'll probably turn up the place where you got the cat harness and chloroform too."

Rogers' voice was shaking. "I want a lawyer."

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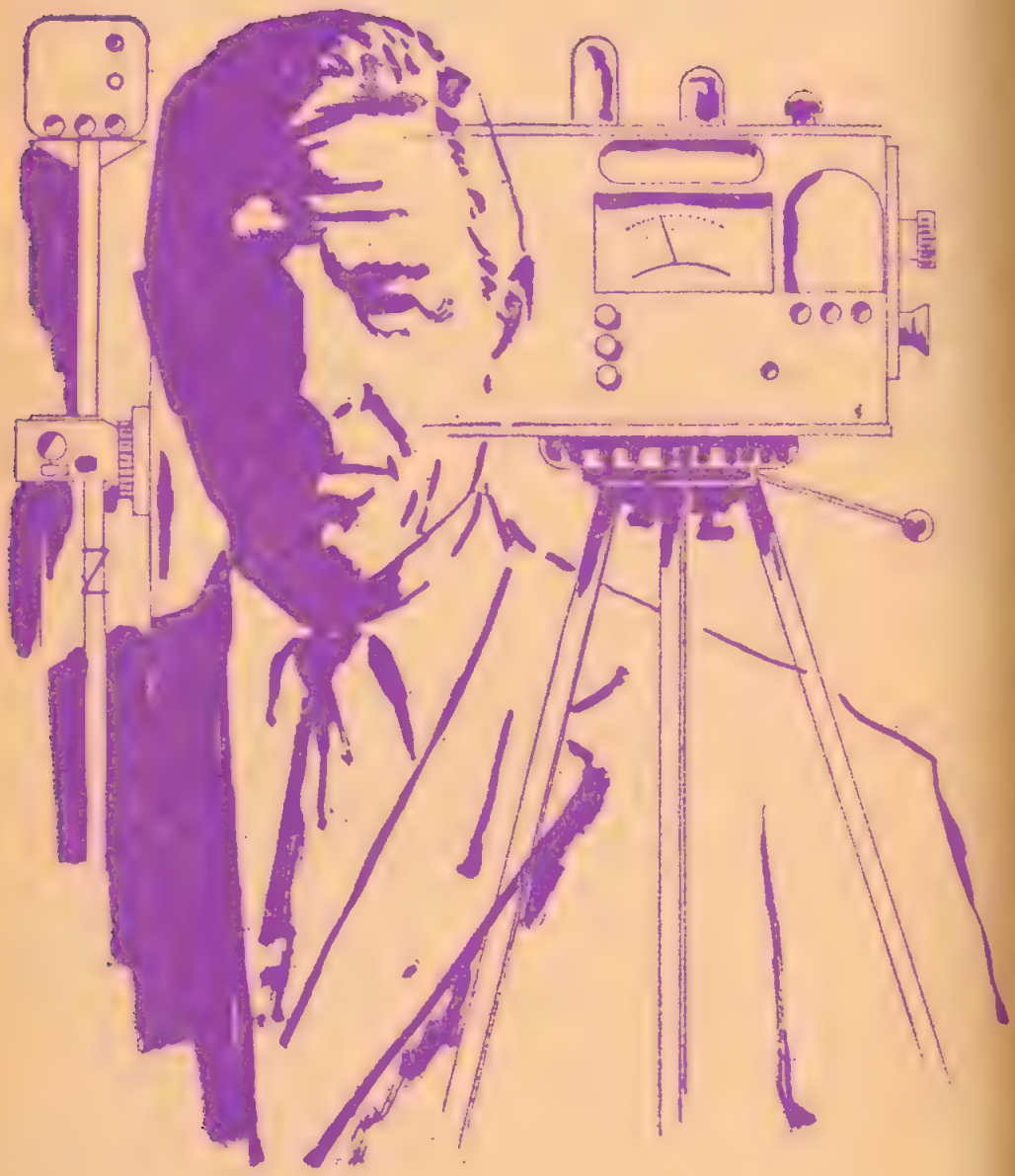

THE MURDER TRAP

Black magic, trickery, murder with mirrors? How could a man meet Death—in an empty, guarded, triple-locked room?

by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

RICHARD VERNER sat back in his desk chair, and turned the knife thoughtfully in his hands. The hilt was checked to give a firm grip, and as he closed his fingers around it, it fit snugly into his palm, the curved guard resting lightly against his thumb. The tapering double-edged blade felt razor-sharp, and its tip was like a needle's point.

Verner slid the knife into its sheath, and handed it back to the colonel, who sat across the desk, in the client's chair.

"A formidable weapon," said Verner.

The colonel, a man of about average height, with a look of intense self-discipline, rolled the knife in a piece of khaki cloth, and snapped a heavy rubber band around the outside.

"The man who owned it was formidable."

"So I understand." Verner

glanced at the hand-written note the colonel had brought with him:

Dear Mr. Verner:

This will introduce Colonel Andrew Sharpe of the U. S. Army. Colonel Sharpe is head of a training school for selected cadets chosen from among certain of our Asian allies.

The colonel's most effective instructor at the training school was an officer you may have heard of—Steve "Tiger" Banks. I had only a slight personal acquaintance with Major Banks, and knew him mostly by reputation. He had an implacable hatred for terrorists of any variety. He was a ruthless and formidable fighter, and on several occasions led guerrilla penetration teams deep into territory controlled by communist terrorists. There he struck such fear into the hearts of the terrorists themselves as to cause widespread desertion from their cause. Major Banks was one of the few westerners of modern times to strike the imagination of Asiatics, who gave him his nickname "Tiger" because of his ferocity in attacking terrorists.

Major Banks was working with Colonel Sharpe on a plan which could have a very great effect on our efforts to defeat communist subversion in Asia. Several weeks ago, however, the major was found dead in his room, and his death was ruled suicide. Colonel Sharpe does not believe it was suicide.

I would appreciate any help you could give Colonel Sharpe.

With many thanks for all your help in the past—

Sincerely,
Martin Grainger

Colonel Sharpe cleared his throat. "As you may know, Mr. Verner, one of the toughest problems in fighting guerrillas is their ability to blend in with the rest of the populace. In the daytime, you may distribute food to a certain individual, and that same night, he may heave a bomb through your window. If the guerrilla could be picked out from among the other people, it would be an enormous help. Major Banks put a great deal of work and ingenuity into the attempt to solve this problem."

Verner nodded thoughtfully. "And he was teaching his technique for doing this?"

The colonel smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid I can't answer that question, Mr. Verner. That's classified information."

"I see. But at any rate, Major Banks was working on this, and now Major Banks is dead."

The colonel nodded. "And the men who examined the circumstances say that Major Banks committed suicide. I don't believe it;

but I have no way to disprove it. I want you to disprove it, Mr. Verner. Then I want you to nail the killer for me."

Verner nodded. "Did General Grainger explain to you that I'm not a detective?"

"The general said you're a heuristician—that is to say, a professional problem-solver. He said that you consult with other experts when necessary, but that your own specialty is the solving of problems. He said that you have a special technique you can use to solve any kind of problem, so long as the facts are available, that he had seen this technique in action, didn't claim to understand it, but it worked. That's good enough for me, Mr. Verner. I don't care how you do it. Just run this murderer into the ground for me."

Verner leaned back. "When did the death take place?"

"A little over three weeks ago. It was a Sunday evening, and Major Banks had gotten back from a weekend trip. Captain Ramsay, another instructor, became worried about Banks, and spoke to me. I phoned Banks, got no answer, and Ramsay and I went over and knocked on Banks' door. There was no reply. The guard on duty told us Major Banks was inside, alone. We called, got no reply, and smashed in the door. Major Banks was on his back on his bunk, stabbed through the heart with his own knife. There was no one else in the room. The windows were shut and locked from inside. The door had a bolt, and two locks, put there apparently by different people who have used the room in the past."

The colonel frowned. "The door works by a knob, has an ordinary latch that clicks shut when you close it, and can be opened by turning a knob on the inside or out. There is a keyhole under the knob, which should work the lock bolt that slides out next to the latch; but this keyhole has, for some reason, been plugged with putty and painted over.

"About ten inches above the knob, there is a tumbler lock which can be worked by a key from the outside, or by an oval brass knob on the inside. When the lock is on, the oval knob is straight up and down. To draw back the bolt and release the lock, you turn the knob to the right or left, and snap down a little stud, which holds the lock open. To lock it again, you press up the little stud, and the lock snaps shut. Above this lock there is an ordinary sliding bolt. Due apparently to settling of the building, this sliding bolt is hard to shove into place.

"I mention all this detail, Mr. Verner, so you'll understand what I mean when I say that when we went in, the door had been locked from inside. It had been locked by snapping up the stud of the second lock I've mentioned—the one with the oval brass knob."

Verner nodded. "That's clear, Colonel. The keyhole of the lower lock was plugged, so that it couldn't be used. The uppermost of the three, the bolt, was hard to shove home. It was the *middle* lock, which worked by a key outside, or an oval knob inside, which had been locked."

"Yes. Exactly."

"Did *this* lock work easily?"

"Yes. It was only the bolt that stuck."

"And the door itself shut easily?"

The colonel nodded. "It did. Now, you see the situation. Major Banks was dead. The windows were locked from within. No one was in the room. There was no other way in or out beside these windows and the door. There was a guard outside who had heard Major Banks snap shut the lock from inside. This guard had seen no one go in or out the door since that time. The natural assumption is that Major Banks killed himself."

"What about the windows? How were they locked?"

"The ordinary type of window-fastener."

"One large pane in the upper and lower sash, or several?"

"Six in each sash."

Verner thought a moment. "Suppose the killer had already loosened one pane, and, after stabbing the major, had climbed out the window, reached through and locked it, put the pane back, held it in place with a couple of glazing points or thin brads, and then stuck dried putty in position using a fast-setting glue? The window would then be locked, apparently from the inside."

The colonel blinked, then said with a smile, "And you're not a detective?"

"Of course not. The problem is, how could a killer have got out? This strikes me as a possible method."

"Yes. What surprised me was that you thought of it so quickly. Well, there are two difficulties. The first is that the ground outside the windows had been soaked by a heavy rain, and was very soft. There were no impressions in this soft earth."

Verner's eyes narrowed in thought. "How far is any road, sidewalk, or other solid surface from the building itself?"

"About five feet, I should say."

"The major's room was on the first floor?"

"Yes."

"What is the building made of?"

"It's faced with red bricks. Why?"

"The windows are set in? There are moderately wide sills?"

"Yes. What does this matter?"

"What was to prevent the murderer from resting one end of a heavy board on the walk and the other end on the sill, and using this board to support his weight as he worked on the window? That way, his footprints would never appear in the soil below the window."

The colonel blinked. "Good Lord! But no, Mr. Verner. Those windows were examined very carefully. They hadn't been tampered with."

"You're sure it wasn't just assumed that whoever went out that way would have been taking too great a risk, so he wouldn't have done it?"

The colonel smiled. "That assumption was made, yes. You see, there are other buildings about a hundred feet away in front, and perhaps fifty feet away to the side. It wasn't quite dark, but Major Banks' lights were on, and his shades down. Whoever went out the window would have been outlined against that light. But I was convinced that this was a murder, and it seemed reasonable that the killer must have gone out a window, however unlikely it seemed. So I had those windows examined very carefully. No one had tampered with them, Mr. Verner."

"That brings us back to the door. There was only one door?"

"Yes, and this opened into the first-floor corridor. There was a guard who could see the door all the time."

"How far away?"

"Just across the hall, facing the door."

"It was his job to guard the major's door?"

"No, it was his job to sign cadets in and out. As it happened, there were only three cadets who went

out, for help from their instructors. Two cadets came in, to see Major Banks. Also, two cadets from upstairs came down to see Major Banks, though they, of course, didn't sign out, since they didn't leave the barracks."

Verner frowned. "The same guard was on duty all the time?"

"Yes, and here again we run into a blank wall. The guard is perfectly reliable. He insists that he did not leave his post, and that he had the major's door in plain view all the time."

"Except when he was signing cadets in or out?"

"Yes, but even then he would have heard the door open. Besides, that was too short a time to be significant."

Verner sat up. "Just a minute, Colonel. Grant that the guard could see the door plainly. Still, it wasn't his job to watch it. He had no special interest in watching that door. If he had been distracted—"

The colonel shook his head. "No, Mr. Verner. You see, he did have a special interest in watching that door. I may as well explain to you

that Major Banks was moody at times. Action stimulated him. Without the stimulus of action, he became severely depressed at times. Now, when Major Banks was depressed, he was barely civil. If he found anyone neglecting his duty, in any way, he could be savage in his reprimands.

"Major Banks was a highly-trained fighting man, and he regarded the extermination of terrorists as his personal aim and duty. He wasn't really happy as a teacher, although he could see the importance of what we were trying to do. Now, on this particular Sunday evening, Major Banks had just gotten back from attending the funeral of his divorced second wife. The cadets who had come over to see Major Banks found him in a black mood, and warned the guard. The two cadets who came downstairs to see him said that he was more depressed than they'd ever seen him.

When they came out, Captain Ramsey happened to be coming in to see Banks. The cadets tried to warn Ramsey, but Ramsey called to Banks and rapped on the door. Without a word, Major Banks snapped the lock shut from inside. Now then, the guard, outside in the hall, was aware that Major Banks had a tendency to come out of these fits of depression by giving a terrific tongue-lashing to whoever he found being slack in his duty. No, Mr. Verner, the guard was on his toes, wide-awake, and acutely conscious of Major Banks' door."

Verner frowned, and looked off at a far corner of the room. "Did the major often snap his lock shut when someone knocked at his door?"

"No, but this wasn't the first time After he got over his depression, he would apologize for any such rudeness. If he felt that he'd been too severe in his treatment of a cadet, he'd be especially considerate to him. It was his version of an apology. He never lost his control to the point of striking anyone. He never spoke insultingly to a cadet or to another officer. He was, however, barely civil, and sometimes not that.

"To snap the lock shut in Ramsey's face was exactly the kind of thing he *would* do. When he was in this mood, he always wanted to be left alone. But the longer he was left alone, the worse he got. Ramsey knew it, and had come over to get him out of it. Banks knew why Ramsey had come over, and he resented it. I imagine that Banks was incapable of saying one friendly word to Ramsey, and rather than have a fight he would regret, he locked the door. That was last contact any of us had with him."

Verner sat back, frowning.

"There was no sound from the room later on? Nothing the guard noticed?"

"No. There'd been a thunderstorm earlier, but it had died away

by then, so that any exceptional sound would have been noticed. Of course, there were quiet sounds all around—sounds of chairs scraping, occasional low voices, the sound of a water tap being turned on—but nothing particularly noticeable from Major Banks room. We questioned the guard closely about this."

Verner leaned back, resting his right elbow in his cupped left hand, his right hand gently massaging the faintly perceptible bristle at his chin.

"You mentioned that the cadets tried to warn Ramsey. Do your cadets speak English?"

"Fluently. And Ramsey understands *their* tongue. But what they said only made him the more anxious to get to Banks."

"The guard, Colonel. Could he have entered the major's room?"

"Not without a key. You remember, it was locked from inside."

"Yes, but if the major came out, delivered a worse tongue-lashing than ever before—"

The colonel thought a moment, then shook his head. "He would have been overheard by the cadets upstairs and down the hall. They heard nothing of the sort."

"Was this a cadet guard?"

"No. He was one of our own men. He is perfectly trustworthy. He understood Major Banks' moods, and sympathized with him."

Verner looked at the colonel. "Sympathized with him?"

The colonel blinked. "Didn't I explain this? No, I didn't. You see, Mr. Verner, Major Banks' first wife and their little son were killed by a terrorists' fire-bomb, tossed through a window of their house. The major got there too late to save them. It would have been better if he'd never seen it at all. To the best of my knowledge, he never had these severe fits of depression before. Given a situation like that, a man will often blame himself that his family was exposed to danger."

Verner sat very still as the colonel talked, then looked off at a far corner of the room.

"You're satisfied the major didn't commit suicide?"

"I'm sure of it. More than that, Mr. Verner, I'm convinced that the people who investigated this murder let themselves fall out of the frame of mind of criminal investigators, and instead fall into the frame of mind of amateur psychologists. On this basis, they decided that Major Banks, for the reasons I've just mentioned, had suicidal tendencies. Therefore, they did not dig as deep into the evidence as they should have.

Verner nodded. "That's possible. I have to admit, this sounds very much like suicide to me."

"You didn't know Steve Banks."

"No. Did your investigators know him?"

"Of course not." The colonel added ironically, "They were impartial, Mr. Verner. They could ob-

serve the problem with a degree of detachment, not blinded by any personal knowledge of Major Banks' character."

"What do the other officers think?"

"They're divided on the question. But that's neither here nor there."

Verner sat back, his eyes closed to mere slits. The colonel waited tensely.

Finally Verner said, "Colonel —"and paused.

"Yes?"

Verner's eyes came open, and he looked across the room, frowning.

"When you went into the room, you saw the major, lying on his bunk, dead?"

"Yes."

"What else did you see?"

The colonel frowned. "Banks' suitcase was open on a chair beside the bunk. A partly-eaten liverwurst sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, was on his desk. His cooler was overturned on the floor by the door, with clumps of frozen ice-cubes strewn around on the rug. The shades were down at all the windows. A lamp on the desk was turned on. A floor lamp was on. The door of his locker was open. That about covers it, I'm afraid."

"Did the major overturn furniture when he was depressed?"

"Not very often. But I understand he once reduced a solid oak chair to splinters. There are dents on the floor, the steel bed frame, and the wall, where the chair hit."

Verner thought that over in silence. Finally, he said, "Why did he happen to have a cooler in his room?"

"It was a picnic cooler, Mr. Verner. He'd had to drive quite a long distance over the weekend. He said he could drive much further, and stay awake better, if he ate as he drove, instead of stopping at eating places. He'd load up the cooler before he started on a trip of any length."

Verner leaned back, studied the far wall. Finally he stirred, glanced back at the colonel.

"You're right, Colonel. This could have been murder. Provided what you've told me is strickly accurate, and provided chance happened to favor the killers."

The colonel's eyes widened. "Killers? You don't think it was one person?"

"I don't see how it could have been."

"Who did it?"

Verner, frowning, raised his hand. "Just a minute. The problem you gave me was to find out if a murder actually occurred, and, if so, to run down the person or persons responsible. Isn't that right?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Seeing how a murder could have happened is not the same thing as proving it did. In this case, I'm afraid it's going to be next to impossible to prove anything by the usual methods. We're going to have to trap the killers, and they will al-

most certainly have thought this through too thoroughly to be easily tricked. To prove this is going to be—"He leaned back, scowling, as the colonel twice began to speak, and each time changed his mind.

Finally, still frowning, Verner said, "It's first going to be necessary to go to your school."

The colonel said ruefully, "I'm sorry, Mr. Verner. The location of the school is classified. I can't reveal it."

Verner said irritably, "If you want this solved, I am going to have to be on the spot."

"Very well. I can take you there. But you can't see anything that will reveal the location."

"I couldn't care less about the location. But I have got to be in that room. And while I'm there I want the guard, two cadets, and Captain Ramsey on hand."

"What do you intend to do?"

Verner looked at the colonel thoughtfully. "It's a little early to say. But would you object if I brought along some scientific friends?"

The colonel looked blank. "What good will that do?"

"I think General Grainger may have mentioned that I use my own methods."

The colonel thought a moment. "Bring anyone you want, Mr. Verner. But they are not to know the location of the school. They will need to be prepared for certain indignities."

ON THE DAY agreed, Verner, along with a chunky, square-built friend named Bartlett, and two men wearing rimless glasses, with sober faces and an air of intense abstraction, waited in Verner's office. Verner stood looking out and down through the Venetian blinds as, below, a tan sedan pulled to the curb, and the colonel stepped out, and glanced up. Five minutes later, they were all on their way to the airport. A few minutes after that, they, with several small crates, were being loaded onto a light plane. Immediately after that, they were heavily blindfolded.

The colonel's voice said regretfully, "I hope you'll excuse the melodrama, gentlemen, but if any one of you should attempt to look out, he will do it only once. I have strict orders to protect the location of the school, and the location of the school will be protected."

Throughout the trip that followed—by plane, car, a second plane, a speedboat, and at last several army Jeeps—the blindfolds re-

mained firmly in place. When they were removed, Verner, Bartlett, and their two companions found themselves in a room about twelve feet wide by twenty long, containing a bunk, a desk, a chair, and a steel clothes locker. The walls of the room were painted a light cream. There were two windows along one side of the room, and one window at the end. Heavy tarpaulins of dark-green canvas blocked any view from the windows. From outside could be heard the faint scrape of branches, as a light wind brushed tree limbs across the face of the building.

The door of the room was on the long inside wall, directly across from one of the two windows on the opposite wall. Seated on folding chairs across the end wall of the room was a U. S. Army sergeant, two young men with close-cropped black hair and olive complexions, and a U. S. Army captain. Against the adjoining wall stood two strongly-built military policemen with holstered .45 automatics at their belts.

The colonel said, "Well, gentlemen, here we are. The door of this room will not be opened until you've finished your work here."

Verner looked the room over intently, then relaxed, and nodded. "That shouldn't take long, Colonel. It's a matter of comparatively simple routine. Now, let me introduce Dr. Grant Dwight Richmond of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Dr. Seaman R. Smith of the California Institute of Technology. Drs. Richmond and Smith are nuclear physicists, and both have done a great deal of work in the structural analysis of steel under severe stress. Most of this work is classified, but I think I can mention that our nuclear submarines can go a little deeper than they might be able to otherwise, thanks to the work of Drs. Richmond and Smith."

The onlookers looked impressed as Dr. Richmond and Dr. Smith cleared his throat, and said, "I suggest we set this apparatus up at once. That really is the larger part of the work."

The colonel said, "If you need help, gentlemen—"

"No, no, Colonel. We're quite used to this."

The crates came apart easily, and as the two men took out several black-finished boxes and a large folding tripod, Verner said, "This also is classified information, but as a certain part of it has become public recently. I think I can give you a rough idea of the part that is not yet public. As you probably know, it is possible to identify quite a few substances by their radiations, their spectra. It has been found possible to detect very small quantities of substances by neutron bombardment, followed by analysis of the resulting radiation, using a gamma-ray spectrometer. In each case, radiation is involved, but of course

the newer process is much more flexible and sensitive for everyday use. It has been used a number of times to convict criminals, using very small samples as evidence."

The colonel was nodding, as if he were familiar with this. The captain worriedly watched the two scientists take out a long shiny tube with a black flexible hose at one end, and a sort of ring-shaped lens around a hole at the other end. The two scientists then pressed a red button on the side of a black-finished box. In turn, they looked through an eye-piece on the back.

Dr. Richmond glanced around the room, then back at his companion. "I think we'd better start with a calibration. We don't know what the background radiation is here."

"All right, Dwight. Let's use the metal rails on that bunk."

Dr. Richmond glanced at the colonel and the little group seated along the wall.

"The flash you will see is not the zeta-radiation. There's no real danger, so please don't be alarmed."

Dr. Smith smiled. "It's just for preliminary activation. There's actually no danger at all. We've done it dozens of times."

The colonel glanced uneasily at Verner, the captain looked around the room nervously, the two MP's glanced yearningly at the door, and the cadets intently watched the two scientists, as if trying to memorize their every move.

Dr. Richmond carried his black box with a small lens on one side across the room and set it on the tripod. He spread the legs of the tripod further apart, aimed the lens at the metal side rail of the bed, peered into the black box, and said, "All set, Rod."

Dr. Smith raised his shiny tube, with its long flexible black hose trailing across the floor to one of the crates, and held it close to the rail of the bed.

"Got the background," said Dr. Richmond. "Go ahead, and we'll get the flux."

Dr. Smith glanced around. "This is in no sense evidence, is it, colonel?"

The colonel said blankly, "What's that?"

"The bed is not evidence."

"No. Of course not."

There was a *snap* and a blinding flash.

Dr. Richmond said apologetically. "There'll be no need for that again. We're zeroed in, now, so to speak. Again, gentlemen, the light is not the radiation. But if I were you, Colonel, I would dispose of the side rail of this bed. There's no harm in brief exposure. But don't let anyone sleep in the bed. Remove that side rail and bury it in a dump, or somewhere out of reach. I'd advise that you bury it at least eight feet deep, just to be safe."

The colonel blinked, started to speak, and Verner interrupted gently. "Dr. Richmond and Dr. Smith are the two leading structural

radiation analysts in the U.S., colonel. What they are able to do amounts practically to a recreation of the precise history of any sample of metal. Several saboteurs and a number of inefficient workmen have been trapped by their methods. When you consider the importance of our nuclear submarines, Drs. Smith and Richmond are two of the most valuable scientists in the U.S. In fact—"

Dr. Richmond was moving the tripod back across the room, to set it in front of the door. The two scientists bent briefly over the tripod. Then Dr. Smith said gently, "Mr. Verner, if you would just give more of the technical aspects, and less personal information, I think it would be of greater interest."

"Well," said Verner, "what this amounts to, is a re-creation, step by step, of every significant physical and chemical change that a given piece of metal has undergone within the limiting time-period of—"

Dr. Smith was aiming his shiny tube at the lock, and Dr. Richmond was carefully adjusting his black box. The MP's were glancing from the door to the bed with no very happy expression. The two cadets had their heads together, talking fast and low in their own tongue. The captain leaned forward and said urgently, "Sir, there's an MP on the other side of that door!"

"Hold it!" shouted the colonel. He leaned out the door, barked a few crisp orders, shut the door, glanced at Verner with an unreadable expression, and then everything was interrupted by a second less bright flash.

"Perfectly harmless," said Dr. Smith. "I wouldn't care to leave my hand on that lock for more than a few hours at a time, but I doubt that anyone will. Anything of interest, Dwight?"

"We seem to have a very brief temperature minimum here that seems quite anomalous. It's so brief I'll have to expand the baseline. Let's have that gauge."

Verner said, "Dr. Richmond seems to have found an anomalous temperature minimum. This means an abnormally low temperature has been applied to that lock, or to some part of it, within the limiting time-period. By expanding the baseline, he can find how long this low temperature lasted, and the heat-transfer effected during that time. From this he can deduce in what way the low temperature was created. That is—"

The two scientists were bent at their instruments.

"Odd," said Dr. Richmond. "This is obviously not a case of air-cooling.

"Look, the latent heat of fusion must have been around 79 to 80."

"Ice," said Dr. Smith.

The colonel said anxiously, "What are they saying?"

"Evidently," said Verner," a piece of ice was pressed against some part of that lock within the

limiting time-period. Now Dr. Richmond will calibrate the base-line, and find out just when this took place. In time, by checking every piece of metal, we will be able to deduce—"

The rest of the sentence was lost in a paralyzing yell, a shrill sound accompanied by the sudden bursting of the two cadets from their chairs, straight for the silent figures of the two scientists bent at their instruments. The two cadets had their hands raised, the flat edges ready to deliver the *karate* chop that could stun or kill a man.

The two MP's, startled, had scarcely time to step away from the wall. The colonel was coming out of his chair in a surprising display of speed. But nothing in the room compared with the two scientists.

Dr. Smith whipped around in a blurred movement too fast to be seen, and rammed the end of his shiny tube into the nearest cadet's midsection. Dr. Richmond bent slightly at the knees, caught the second cadet by a fistful of shirt front, and in a rapid sequence of movements spun him over his head and slammed him to the floor. The cadet succeeded in partially breaking the fall, but then smashed into the wall. The first cadet, bent from the blow in the midsection, paused before Dr. Smith for a brief fraction of a second, and in this brief instant, Dr. Smith cracked him over the head with his shiny tube.

The two MP's were now getting into action. The colonel was on his feet, wide-eyed, and ordered the MP's back. Staring at Verner, who hadn't moved an inch, and then at Bartlett, who had a little tear-gas gun in his hand, the colonel's face suddenly split in a grin.

"By God! The whole thing was a fraud!"

Verner smiled. "There's nothing like science, Colonel. Never underestimate it."

The colonel stepped over to the black box on its tripod, "If there's anything in this box, I'm a Marine."

Dr. Richard said, "Then you've got the wrong uniform on, Colonel. Press that red button at the side."

The colonel found the red button pressed it, and looked through an eye-piece in the back of the box. Before him, a series of neatly-printed lines lit up in red:

Richmond: *"I think we'd better start with a calibration. We don't know what the background radiation is here."*

Smith: *"All right, Dwight, Let's use the metal rails on the bunk.* (*check bunk*)

Richmond: (*turn to watchers*) *"The flash you will see is not the zeta-radiation, there's no danger, so please don't be alarmed."*

Smith: (*smile reassuringly*) *"It's just for preliminary activation. There's actually no danger at all . . .*

The colonel swore and straightened up. He glanced at the captain,

"Take a look at this, Ramsey. Push this little button, and see what's in there."

As the captain bent to stare into the box, the colonel turned to Verner. "You're wasting your time as a heuristician. You could be the greatest confidence man ever seen in the western hemisphere."

Verner, smiling broadly, said, "Well, it fooled them, Colonel, and it solves your problem. You see what happened, of course?"

"Yes, of course I see what happened. They thought these two scientists were methodically tracking them down, and they decided to act before it was too late. You'd built these two all-time close-combat experts, or seventh-dan judo masters, or whatever they are, up into the two most valuable scientists in the United States. Naturally, this pair of communist saboteurs—the cadets—having finished off one of our greatest guerrilla-warfare experts, and seeing that they were about to be found out anyway, jumped at the chance to score some more points by killing our scientists before we could stop them. So they sprang headfirst into the trap."

The colonel, beaming, thought a moment. "You apparently already knew how they'd made Major Banks' death look like suicide. But there was no way to *prove* it. So you trapped them into thinking it was being proved right before their eyes. But how did you know what they'd done?"

Verner smiled. "It was a simple matter, Colonel. Obviously, if anyone *had* murdered the major, and if the facts you stated were true, the two cadets must have been lying. They claimed to have last seen the major alive. No one had entered or left his room since they had left it, until the major was found dead. It follows that he either committed suicide, or else he was *not* alive when they left him. Since no one else could have entered the room unseen, no one else could have committed a murder."

"Yes, it follows. But the ice against the lock—If that was false, it would have been a dead giveaway—"

"Why?" said Verner. "For all the cadets knew, someone might have put ice, for some reason, against the lock. All that conversation would have been so much gibberish to them, they would merely have been confused, not alarmed, unless they knew it were true."

"I still don't quite follow it," said the colonel. "What the deuce has ice to do with the question?"

"The door lock was snapped from within, you remember?—Without a word from Banks. This suggests the possibility that he was already dead. Then, who snapped the lock? No-one went in or out after the door was locked, and no-one but Banks was found in the room. It follows, if Banks was already dead, that no one snapped the lock. How, then was it done? Some gad-

get or device might have been used to do it. I could think of several possibilities, but none that would not leave something inside the room, to be found when the door was opened. You said there was no special confusion. It follows that if any device had been used it would have been seen. It would have exposed the murder the moment it was noticed.—Unless it wasn't noticed because it was expected."

The colonel was frowning. "And —"

"Colonel, there was Major Banks' overturned cooler, and ice from it strewn around by the door. What if the cadets pushed the stud of the lock up, as if to lock the door, but held the oval knob back so the lock couldn't work, then fitted in a piece of ice, to hold back the knob while they left the room?"

The colonel swore, and crossed to look at the lock. He pushed the stud up, and turned the oval knob. The door unlocked. While he held the knob turned, the door stayed unlocked.

He let go of the knob, and the door locked with a snap. He looked around.

"They could have fitted that ice between the knob and the hand bolt above it."

Verner nodded. "When you mentioned that bolt above the lock, and the ice, it made murder a distinct possibility. To hold open the lock, there has to be a prop, and there has to be something to rest the prop against. In this case, there were both."

"So, when Ramsey here rapped on the door, he jarred the ice loose?"

Verner nodded. "Whereupon it fell to the rug inside the room, and the lock snapped shut. This must have been much better than the cadets had expected. They could only have expected the guard to hear the snap of the lock. After killing the major, they would have to leave, then quickly change their minds and come back, knock, and hope that the ice jarred loose.

"But the captain came along, and the way it worked out couldn't have been better for them. The ice, meanwhile, having fallen on the rug near the other ice, was apparently just one more piece from the cooler. Since the cooler was overturned, there seemed nothing unusual about the ice on the floor."

The colonel nodded. "Yes, I see it now." He glanced around at the cadets, now sullenly handcuffed, with the MP's watching them closely. The colonel's gaze hardened. Then he looked at the two scientists who already had their crates repacked and were ready to leave.

The colonel smiled. "What recruits they would make! Or are they already in some branch of the service? Where the deuce did you get them?"

Verner smiled.

"I'm sorry, colonel. That's classified information."

by BRYCE WALTON

It's All George's Fault

She had lived with fear, with hate. The hate would take a long time to die; the fear would die today—with him!

HILDA MAY looked out a window and shivered. Sand hills, weed patches and chicken shacks were gray in a haze of drizzling rain. Everything damp. Oh well, it had always seemed worse before she'd decided to be rid of George.

Hilda May never thought of it exactly as "murder." It was ". . . being free of George." Or, "rid of George." Or ". . . poor George's sure to have a fatal accident driving that old pickup."

She knew how the "accident" would occur, and where. But not just when. So she didn't dream it would happen this very Saturday, in precisely five more soggy minutes.

She padded back into the dank bedroom, frowned into the mirror at her plump neck, at the way her housecoat bulged. Really should diet.

Will, too, soon as I'm free of George. Thirty-seven now, but she

could still have a cute little figure if it weren't for George.

Wasn't it George's fault she was stuck out in these lonely hills on a stinking chicken ranch, with nothing interesting to do but eat? She'd soon get her figure back—as soon as George had his accident.

That thought perked Hilda May's spirits up a bit. She resumed her aimless ponderous padding from room to room, while chain-eating from a king-sized box of marshmallow cookies. Bleached out little clapboard frame house, a few sticks of used furniture. Hilda May loathed every dusty square inch of it. It was just like George. Second hand, small, cheap.

"Can't afford nothin' better now," George had insisted in his sour, flat voice. "Gotta put every cent into the chickens."

When Hilda May first met George he wasn't sour, or flat, or stubborn at all. That had been at a little social get-together at the home of her cousin Annie, whom she'd come to visit in Valley Junction.

"There's an easy catch," Annie said, pointing to George, "for someone who could stand that face."

George sat stiffly in a corner. Pink balding head, funny little chipmunk face, pale wet eyes in a blank face. But according to Annie, he'd come into some valuable property. And as a bachelor, he'd accumulated a nice bank account during all his years working in the flour mill. He was also in his late fifties and didn't look very durable.

Hilda May's interest flared. She'd tried marriage twice before with unfortunate results. Now, considering her age, she figured this time just about had to work. And George seemed a good prospect for a last gamble where you wanted to avoid odds.

George was meek, shy, lonely and grateful as a pup for a woman's touch. He seemed so eager to do just anything for Hilda May that she was sure she would have it all her way and later could swing a profitable divorce and property settlement.

But then they were married. And suddenly Hilda May began to wonder if George hadn't cut his teeth on *Dr. Jekyl and Mister Hyde.* Just about overnight he turned shamelessly into a fraud, a two-faced, skin-flinted phony. He wasn't shy and meek, at least with her, not any more. He was mule stubborn, hard as flint. The "valuable property" turned out to be a run-down chicken farm he took only because he picked it up dirt cheap.

Investing in his farm, in new buildings and equipment, stock and feed and so forth ate up most of his savings.

And anyway he had turned out to be a penny-pinching miser who refused to open a joint bank account.

"I won't move out in the sticks," Hilda May screamed at stubborn

George. "I won't. I'm city. I got to have people, excitement."

George had looked up at her with those pale moist eyes and shook his head solemnly. "You're my wife now. You gotta go where I go, work at my side and take the sweet with the bitter. Little old-fashioned, maybe. But that's how I see it. Don't try to change me."

So Hilda May suffered. Solitude, as the minister said, is the playfield of Satan.

Her lop-sided house slippers padded slowly back and forth now, round and round, room to room, window to window, like the paws of a heavy imprisoned cat. She padded back into the bedroom, popping another chocolate-coated marshmallow cookie into her mouth, then stood grinning at the unmade bed. Back in the kitchen, she grinned at the sink full of dirty dishes, and a number of fat flies crawling about, too lazy to fly on a rainy day.

Hilda May began to giggle, thinking about how riled up George got when he came in from his chickens and saw the unmade bed, the dirty dishes, the flies, and the cute little dust mice in every corner. Hilda May had been a clean, conscientious housekeeper until she married George.

But now the temptation of teasing George, watching him burn and fume and fizzle with rage was too great. He never said much, yell or swear or anything, but she could tell when he got so mad he was near to exploding. His face turned red. His pale wet eyes bulged. His lips quivered.

But the worst was when he gave Hilda May driving lessons. Then George really blew his gasket. He was really fit to be tied then, when he got Hilda May under the wheel of the truck and tried to overcome her feminine resistance to things mechanical.

Hilda May giggled even louder, thinking about those driving lessons. The way George sat beside her, yelling—yes, those driving lessons even made George break out in a kind of scream—his legs braced, fists clenched, face mottled, those fishy wet eyes of his popping like ping-pong balls.

"No! Not the clutch, nitwit! The brake, the brake!"

She giggled.

"Stay on your side of the road—wait—oh—"

Hilda May giggled so hard, chocolate dribbled down out of the corner of her mouth and smeared the bib of her housecoat. No matter how crazy those driving lessons made George, he insisted on them. He gave up on the messy house, but not on the driving. She *had* to learn to drive. She had to ease the burden of driving for George, he explained.

"Doc Foley says my heart's getting bad, real wobbly. I got to avoid strain, any kind of tensions. Specially, he said, like drivin' down

into town round those hairpin turns. So, Hilda May, you got to drive good enough to get us down town and back, and over to the feed stores and all."

Then later he had grumbled, "But it looks like I'm more liable to have a stroke trying to teach you. The strain of being in here when you're trying to drive is enough to scare a healthy man to death."

Hilda May had already thought of that. If he had a fatal heart attack while teaching her to drive, or had an attack and drove off the road getting down into town, it would mean she'd be free. Actually, she had been teasing George with the driving things, just like with the unmade beds, dirty dishes and dust mice. The truth was that Hilda May could have driven the pickup down into town and back perfectly well, after only three or four lessons. She had deliberately played dumb, just to watch George fume and fuss.

Later she deliberately played dumb, hoping George would have a fatal accident. She had even proved her ability to herself a few times. When George went off on foot to hunt jackrabbits, she had taken the pickup out onto the gravel road and driven it a few miles as pretty as you please.

Then she'd found out about the insurance, and after that she knew she couldn't afford to stall around much longer about the driving or anything else. Seemed George had this $15,000 life insurance policy with a double indemnity, accidental-death clause. Small dinky policy, typical of George, but doubled it was $30,000. That, plus what she might sell the property for, wasn't to be sneezed at.

But a heart attack wouldn't be considered an accident. Hilda May soon found out about that. If George passed on as a direct result of his wobbly heart, her take would be zero.

No. Hilda May dreamed of dieting, getting a smooth golden tan on Miami beach. George would have to have an accident.

She figured out how the accident would happen, but not exactly when. She knew it had to be soon, though. George might have a fatal heart attack and spoil everything. He'd had a few little attacks, but he took those pills Doc Foley had given him and perked right up.

On the other hand, he might go on for years, which would be just as bad for Hilda May, or worse. She knew that a little longer on this chicken farm might be too long for Hilda May. She could go right out of her mind, she knew, really lose her marbles.

Hilda May was padding back into the bedroom, when she heard the rear screen door slam. A gasping and choking was followed by a thud that shook the flimsy house.

Hurrying into the kitchen, she saw George with rubber boots and wet mackinaw sprawled in a

spreading puddle of rainwater on the worn linoleum floor.

"Maybe this is it, the time," she thought with a dreamy little chill of excitement. *"Time for the fatal accident to start."*

For the thing that had bothered her was this problem of hitting George on the head. It had to be thought of as accidental death, when he was found in the wrecked pickup. She knew that the best thing would be a head injury. She had decided to use a heavy cord of firewood.

But this problem of just when, it had puzzled her. Hitting a man on the head could have complications. He mustn't know you were going to do it, otherwise he might get away. You sneaked up behind him, he might hear you and spoil everything. One chance was all you got, for if you knew what you wanted to do, why he'd up and cancel the insurance, spoil all her plans for a good time.

She'd thought of doing it when he was sleeping, either in his chair in the living room, or in bed. The only trouble with that would be the mess it might make on the bed clothes, or on the chair. It would all have to be disposed of.

But this might be better. This could be the perfect time, Hilda May thought, as she looked down at George twisting with pain, pawing at his sparrow chest and looking up at Hilda May with those pale wet eyes.

"Took pill," he gasped. "No good. Bad, this is bad one."

How bad, she thought? Can he move much? Can he get up?

"Try phone again. See if it works yet—call Doc."

She backed into the living room, took the receiver from the hook and made a pretense of trying to phone. The telephone lines were down this morning, George had said, on account of the rainstorm. She came back into the kitchen and looked down at George.

"Phone's still dead," she said.

"Then you got to drive down into town, Hilda May. Fast—you got to go fast now—"

"Hadn't I ought to drive you down? That'd be quicker."

"Better not move. Pill may save me til Doc gets up here. Yes, better just lie and avoid strain until Doc gets here. Hurry—"

"Don't know if I'm good enough driver yet, but I'll try."

A faint, pain-twisted grin curled his thin mouth. "I seen you drivin' once. Come back from huntin'; seen you drivin' all by yourself. I

know. You are plannin' to surprise me—"

"Yes. I'll hurry."

She backed off into the living room. An odd humming, like a swarm of bees, began in her head as she backed toward the fireplace and picked up a heavy cord of wood from the pile in the woodbox. She came back toward the kitchen, never having taken her fixed gaze from the bald pink wet top of George's head. It didn't move. Didn't twist around to look at her as she padded back toward it, the corlwood gripped behind her with both hands.

Then she remembered the plastic clothes cover. Mustn't forget anything, she reminded herself. She went into the bedroom and got a plastic clothes cover and an old pillow from the closet. She quietly placed the chunk of cordwood on the floor as she knelt down behind George and placed the pillow, wrapped in the clothes cover, under his head.

"Don't bother with this. Hurry to town," George gasped weakly.

Hilda May slid back on her knees, picked up the cordwood and brought it down with all of her might on George's forehead.

His body quivered, twitched a little. His head waggled just a little too, like a snake's when you hit it with a stick. But that was all. Hilda May was surprised at how hard it was.

The way the heavy cordwood bounced, sent a tingling numbness up both her arms.

She had thought about it so often that she didn't have to think about it now. She didn't waste time or motion, nor did she forget anything. She moved with methodical surety, like someone obeying orders during a hypnotic trance.

This is just an accident I got mixed up in, she thought vaguely. Wasn't it an accident that she was caught up in and couldn't have avoided? No one's responsible for an accident. Accidents just happen. Like if she hadn't visited her cousin Annie just when she did, she wouldn't have been at that social get-together and wouldn't have met George and wouldn't have ended up here on a chicken farm. Instead, she might have had a good accident. She might have met someone else, and ended up in a nice sunny apartment, near shops and with a checking account and a girl to come in and clean.

There was no tell-tale stain on the linoleum. The plastic clothes cover had caught everything. She pulled the ends of the plastic up and around George's head and tied it with a length of nylon thread. Then she dragged George outside, wrapping him in an old piece of tarpaulin. It was only twenty-five feet to the pickup. There she got him out of the tarp and up into the cabin of the truck. He was considerably smaller than Hilda May, so this was no problem.

Then she took the plastic clothes cover off his head and ran back into the kitchen with it. It and the stained hunk of cordwood, she dropped into the fireplace on top of several other cords of wood. She sprinkled on kerosene and set it afire. What else?

Oh yes, the magazines. Ought to do that right now. Someone might come around snooping any time from now on. She wanted anyone who might be curious to know how much she had really wanted to help George, especially how much she had wanted to ease George's driving burden. So she grabbed up several copies of *Popular Mechanics* and *Auto Age* that were lying open beside George's easy chair in the living room, and she took them into her private little sewing room and placed them conspicuously open among her *True Confessions* and *Woman's Day*.

As she started back toward the kitchen, she noticed that her hands were greasy with black dirty smudges. Must have come from George's clothes, or from touching the car somewhere. So what? She washed off the grease in the kitchen sink, then decided to take a hot shower. After that she put on slacks, flat-soled shoes and a khaki blouse, a raincoat and hat. Then she went back out to the truck.

She drove very slowly and carefully down the rain-hazed grade, hearing only the muffled beat of the coasting engine, pattering of rain and splatter of gravel hitting the bottom of the truck. Vision was poor, but she didn't worry. She drove very slowly and there was never any traffic on this road, especially in bad weather.

She didn't drive more than four or five miles an hour as she approached the first hairpin turn. She had never taken the truck out of low gear so that she hardly had to use the brakes when she stopped by the sharp curve, with the truck facing the jump-off.

She got out, after setting the emergency brake, and walked to the curve, made sure no cars were coming from either direction. She listened, heard nothing but rain pattering monotonously on weeds and rocks along the lonely road. She returned to the truck, slid George over beneath the wheel, took off the brake, jerked the clutch into high and pushed.

It was easy enough to push it into motion on that steep grade, then suddenly it tipped and scraped and labored its way over the edge. A rain-muffled crash came back to Hilda May, then she started walking back up the road toward the house.

One of Dan Moseley's boys, out looking for stray sheep, heard the crash. He ran up the dry river bed under the drop and found the wrecked truck and George in it, dead, just next to a cabin.

The Moseley boy ran home and told Dan Moseley, who phoned it

in to Sheriff Ed McGaw in Valley Junction. Sheriff McGaw tried to phone Mrs. George Denton, but the phone there was out of order, the operator said.

Sheriff McGaw and two deputies went out there and raised George's remains up to the road with a block-and-tackle. While the deputies took the battered corpse down into town to the coroner, Sheriff McGaw went over the wreckage and the roadway above with deliberate slowness and meticulous concern.

Then he drove up and told Hilda May the sad news. She didn't have to put on an act. She sat pale and tearless after that at the kitchen table as if too shocked, too stunned to cry.

Sheriff McGaw watched her with awkward sympathy, his small black probing eyes in a porcine weather-eroded face avoiding her direct gaze. He sucked and gulped at a second cup of black coffee.

"More coffee?" she asked listlessly.

"No thanks, ma'am." He looked around. "Poor George. I mean he always hankered for a little land and business of his own in the country. But he didn't enjoy it long."

"I feel sort of guilty," she murmured.

"How's that, ma'am?"

"Well, he wanted me to learn to drive good, so he wouldn't have to drive down that grade and maybe have a bad accident on those nasty turns."

"He was real afraid of that, was he?"

"Yes, on account of he had a bad heart. Doc Foley told him he ought to avoid the strain of driving down into town."

She stood up and led Sheriff McGaw into the little sewing room.

"See here," she said sadly, "George's magazines." She pointed to the opened copies of *Popular Mechanics* and *Auto Age.* "George wanted me to learn to drive, and I did try. I really tried and I was learning. I can drive a little. Not only that but I studied these magazines real hard so I'd know more about cars. I could have helped George a lot if he had a flat, or something went wrong on the road, you know?"

"Mighty commendable of you, ma'am," Sheriff McGaw said. "You got no reason to fault yourself."

"I guess George never trusted my driving quite enough. Still, I feel sort of bad, I mean if he'd let me drive this'd never happened."

McGaw uneasily patted her plump arm and repeated that it wasn't her fault. But he kept staring at the *Popular Mechanics.* He picked it up and stared at it some more.

"I'd like to borrow this," he said. "If it's all right with you, ma'am?"

"It sure is, Sheriff. I won't be needing it any more. I swear I'll

never think of driving a car again. Never as long as I live."

Then she asked if Sheriff McGaw wanted more coffee and he said he didn't and he went out, mumbling to himself, and drove away.

But Sheriff McGaw was back Sunday afternoon. Hilda May was already packing to get out.

"You want a cup of coffee, Sheriff? It's fresh."

"No thanks, ma'am," Sheriff McGaw said, rather glumly. He took the *Popular Mechanics* magazine out of his pocket and put it down on the kitchen table, open and greasy.

"Didn't have to go to any trouble bringing that back," Hilda May said, feeling somewhat uneasy without knowing why.

Sheriff McGaw slowly and heavily shook his head and sat stiffly on the edge of his chair and rested one big hand on the table. He looked at Hilda May in a very steady and serious way.

"Didn't come back because of the magazine exactly, ma'am."

"What for then, if not for more of my fresh coffee?"

Sheriff McGaw explained it all to Hilda May, the way some medical sages give a patient detailed clinical reasons for his disease.

"I asked a special medical examiner to be sent over from the county seat to look at George. Head bashed in. Could have happened as a result of the accident, and so I reckon you come into some money."

She nodded wearily.

He kept watching her face glumly. "Sure does look like an accident, ma'am. An ordinary, all too common accident. One of hundreds of thousands of automobile accidents that take over fifty thousand lives a year."

"That's just terrible isn't it?" she said.

"It sure is terrible, ma'am, specially when a goodly portion of those auto accidents aren't accidents at all but murders."

"What?" she said. She just stood there near the table and realized she was standing where George's head had been.

"Some—too many of them are murders, ma'am. Caused by someone deliberately tampering with cars to make them go out of control."

She stared at him with genuine, sincere incomprehension.

"Local law enforcement officers have been getting the word to look a lot closer at auto accidents. Try

to make sure they really are accidents."

"Who on earth would want to tamper with George's car?" she asked.

"I called in an expert mechanic, too," McGaw said. "Went over that wreck from front to rear. Well, soon as the brake pedal was depressed, it was plain as sin that something had gone haywire with the braking system. Examined the brake lines. Brake lines hammered closed along rear axle housing. So when George pushed down hard on the brakes, the right wheel kept going, while the left wheel slowed because the line on that side hadn't been left altogether closed and some fluid was coming through.

"Our expert mechanic says this is a common way for a murderer to tamper with a car. Skid marks had been washed out I reckon, by that evening downpour."

Hilda May just kept on looking genuinely baffled.

"Somebody tampered," Sheriff McGaw said dolefully. "When brake line's blocked to one wheel —say the right rear—and you make a panic stop, and the left rear gets a small amount of fluid, then the car just has to go into an uncontrolled right turn."

"Well, it's just mud to me," Hilda May said truthfully. "I just don't know beans about machinery and like that. I just started studying those magazines, but I didn't really learn anything."

"No?" Sheriff McGaw's jaw hardened. "So it was fixed so when George trampled that brake as he hit the hairpin turn, the car went out of control. Kept going right instead of left, and went right over the shoulder into space. This is ugly, ma'am. Condition of that brake line spells murder. Someone deliberately hammered that brake line closed. Caused the brakes to fail."

"But who? Who'd have anything against George?" Hilda May asked tensely.

"Only one I can figure," Sheriff McGaw said, "is you, ma'am."

After a while, with the humming like a swarm of bees in her head again, Hilda May said. "Me? Why that's crazy, Sheriff McGaw. Couldn't have been me. I loved George. I tried to help him always, best I could."

"Been murder done for lot less than thirty thousand dollars," Sheriff McGaw said softly. "People in town never could figure why you'd marry old George for any other reason but his money. And there are other funny things here, ma'am, that look mighty suspicious."

"But I don't know how to hammer a brake line," Hilda May said thinly. "I don't even know what a brake line is, or where it is, and I wouldn't know how—"

McGaw interrupted. "You said George had a bum ticker, but I checked with Doc Foley. Doc says

George's heart was strong as could be. Not a murmur in it."

"But George told me he had a wobbly heart. And he—he had attacks. I saw—"

"Now why'd he tell you that if it wasn't so?" Sheriff McGaw said, affronted. "And what about the telephone? I tried to call. Operator said phone out of order here. Coming here this time, I checked outside the house there. Those telephone wires have been deliberately disconnected, pulled out. Reckon that was done so in case the so-called accident didn't come off just right, you'd have an excuse for not calling for help until you made sure the accident *was* right.

"And you said you didn't learn to drive well enough to satisfy George. But the Moseley boy says different. He says he saw you wheelin that old truck up and down the road all by yourself and doin it good enough to get a driver's license anywhere."

The humming in Hilda May's head got louder. She wondered if Sheriff McGaw might hear it too.

"And this!" He tapped the grease-smeared pages of the opened *Popular Mechanics*. "This is what started me being suspicious in the first place, ma'am. This article here, the title and all caught my eye right off." He held it up.

She stared at the blurring print. *Murder By Auto,* the article was called. Under that, in smaller print, it said. "How many 'fatal' accidents are really premeditated homicides? Here are ten mechanically ingenious ways murders are being committed daily with automobiles."

"So," she heard Sheriff McGaw going on, "why were you so interested in reading this article, ma'am? Why it's been studied over til it's plumb dog-eared with use. And these grease smears, they're all your fingerprints, ma'am. And this grease—it's fluid from those hammered brake lines."

I got it from George's clothes, she thought. That's where I got that grease on my hands. And George got it on his clothes *because he was tampering with the brake lines or whatever they were.*

Sheriff McGaw's face blurred, seemed to shrink and swell again and bob strangely like a fuzzy balloon.

"But it isn't true," she whispered with outraged sincerity. "Like I said, I couldn't tamper with a car. I wouldn't have the faintest idea where or how to start and—"

But her voice shrank and faded and died away like air escaping from a punctured tire.

"Have a hard time proving that," Sheriff McGaw said. "But you'll get your fair chance. Because I'm just going to have to take you in, ma'am, and charge you with the premeditated murder of George Denton."

"But it isn't true," she kept whispering. "I didn't do any of those things. George, he did—he—"

She stopped. She wanted to explain that it was George who had done all of those things. George had lied about having a wobbly heart, hoping it would spur her into driving the car sooner. George had disconnected the phone so that when he pretended to have that last bad heart attack she wouldn't be able to phone Doc Foley for help, but would have to drive down into town. It was George who had tampered with whatever had been tampered with.

Only no one would ever believe it. Who would think that George would tamper with the brakes, then get into the car and drive it down the road to certain death? No one would ever believe that.

"It was all an accident, all of it," she whispered. But they probably wouldn't understand that either. Oh I'm in trouble now all right, she thought, as the humming grew louder and louder. A real awful mess of trouble, and it's all George's fault.

Sheriff McGaw stood up.

"Ma'am," he said with some alarm, "what are you doing that for? Giggling like that?"

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TOO MANY KILOWATTS

Hope dies hard, he told himself. But—men die easy!

by
HOLLIS DANVERS

HAD BART STEVENS not been a curious-minded young man, or had he not chosen to take an after-breakfast stroll with his dog that Sunday, he'd never have learned what a dangerous situation a $12.-60 light bill could develop.

As it was, he strolled east across his deep-carpeted lawn, shaded by towering oaks and pecans. Lisa,

brown and shaggy, half cocker and half pot-luck, ran a poor second in a race with a squirrel.

Following the Murdock's driveway, they turned north, Bart anticipating the delight of an afternoon of golf, Lisa sweeping the adjacent lawns as a setter hunts a field.

At the corner, on the left, a for-sale sign stabbed the lawn of the Early American bungalow of Fred and Betty Stinson who, having built a new home, had recently moved.

Lisa made a passing sniff at a post card that lay on the grass next to the curb. Idly, Bart picked it up, intending to toss it into the trash barrel after circling the block. He started to stick it into his pocket, but it was wet from the morning dew.

Then he paused, his attention arrested. It wasn't a post card; it was a residential electric bill, a yellow computer card, punched on an IBM machine and represented a debt of $12.60.

Bart's accountant's curiosity was aroused. The card had been mailed five days before to Luke C. Corbin, 224 S. Plaza, Venturi, Oklahoma. How would a current light bill issued in Venturi, Oklahoma, get down here eighty miles away in another state? He frowned thoughtfully, looking up at the uncut lawn which already was giving the house a deserted look.

He started to move on but paused again. The living-room drapes, which had been kept closed since the Stinsons moved, were partly drawn. Bart thought he saw somebody inside move. Probably only a reflection in the picture window. Or maybe somebody had bought the place.

Shrugging, he whistled for Lisa and resumed his walk, still holding the damp card. He would show it to Helen. She not only knew everything that happened in the neighborhood, but was exceptionally good at working puzzles. But if they had sold the house, why was the for-sale sign still posted on the lawn?

Inside the living room, a small, bald-headed man stood near the open drapes. A washed-out blonde, a head taller and ten pounds heavier, was standing in the hall doorway. Her voice grated.

"What're you tryin' to do—get that pasty face mentally photographed by every crumb in the block!"

The man held up a hand and said, "It's that kook walkin' his dog again." Then he whirled, his black eyes burning. "An' if he just picked up what I think he did, I'll beat some brains into that thick head of yours!"

He swept across the room. "Get in the car!" He gave her a push. "Like we're goin' to the store. Move! An' keep your big mouth closed!"

They raced out through the kitchen and into the garage. He kicked the engine into life and backed out, purposely blocking the

walk just as Bart came up. Then he eased out into the street and drove off in the opposite direction.

The blonde said, "What—"

"Shut up an' let me think. He's got it!"

After they had gone around the block and were back inside the house, the blonde lost her patience. *"He's got what?"*

"Your passport to the pen—that damn light bill you forgot to mail before we left. He had it in his hand. You been carrin' it around in that two-bucket handbag of yours, an' the night the broker showed us the house, you dug for cigarettes. That's right where we parked, an' it's been layin' there ever since. Now, look after things till Ned shows. I got to do some checkin'."

Around the corner, Bart waited for the black car to back out of the Stinson garage. The small man was driving. He looked to be thirtyish, with sharp, pallid features. Beside him was the large blonde of indeterminate age. It struck Bart as they drove away that they appeared more than casually interested in his presence. He noted that the car bore an Oklahoma license plate—2-1174.

Then, remembering the light bill which he still held, he quickened his pace, conscious of a small feeling of guilt, as if he had been caught snooping.

At home his wife, Helen, was busy in the kitchen. Lisa skidded on the vinyl floor in her eagerness to announce their return. As Bart poured two cups of coffee, he tossed the utility bill on the formica table and he and Helen sat down.

"You're good at riddles," he said lightly. "What do you make of that?"

Helen sipped her coffee absently, her green eyes studying the card. She slid it back. "Where'd you get it?"

He told her, mentioning the questionable movement in the living room and the departure of the car with its occupants. "Its being there is probably only coincidence, maybe blown there by the wind."

Helen's eyes widened. "All the way from Oklahoma? I don't want to be dramatic, but that's not the only coincidence." She reached to the counter for the morning newspaper, turned a page and added, "I thought the name Venturi rang a bell. Day before yesterday, little Kathy Turner was kidnaped from that town."

Bart read the account. "Nothing since a printed note demanding two hundred thousand dollars. George Turner builds airplanes." He lit his pipe and relaxed. "Pure coincidence."

"The Stinsons must have sold the house."

"A for-sale sign is still on the lawn, but I'll call Fred." He checked information for the new number and dialed. As Bart listened, Helen's interest sharpened. Finally, Bart asked, "Was it Luke

C. Corbin of Venturi, Oklahoma?" Another long delay, then, "Thanks. Come to see us."

He dropped the receiver into the cradle. "They didn't sell it. They rented it, partly furnished, for two months to a Herbert Walthers of Tulsa. That seems to settle that." He stood up.

Helen was still serious and a little vexed. "I don't see that it settles anything. How do either we or Fred know that any Herbert Walthers even exists—at Tulsa or anywhere else? This thing may be remote, Bart, but it could be important. I think we owe it to that poor Turner family to call the FBI."

"Oh, honey—hell—"

"All right—oh, honey, hell, but little Kathy isn't your daughter." She got up from the table and moved toward the living room. "I'm sorry, Bart. Sometimes my imagination won't quit. Enjoy your golf, but don't play the nineteenth hole too long. We're invited to the Murdocks for seafood gumbo at seven, you know."

Lisa followed her out of the kitchen. Bart took his golf clothes and drove to the club, but despite his assumed indifference, his mind wasn't on golf. It spun with conflicting thoughts all during the game.

What if Helen were right? She was a pretty level-headed young woman, not prone to fantasy. Even later, while dressing for the dinner with Ben and Anna Murdock, he couldn't throw off the nagging guilt that perhaps he should act.

Being close friends, the evening was fun, though lacking some of its usual open gaiety. Bart was too quiet, a mood leveled somewhat by the drinks but in no way lost to his wife.

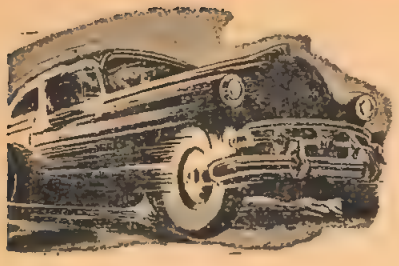
She sensed his preoccupation and felt relief when the evening was over and they could leave.

Halfway back across the lawn, Lisa growled and came to a rigid point. Bart gave Helen's arm a little pressure of warning and spoke softly. "Don't turn your head—just keep walking. I think there's somebody in the trees toward the Stinson house." Then loudly, "Come on, Lisa! Here we go!" Lisa broke her stance, and they went around the house to the back door.

Relieved to be home but still uneasy, Helen started for the bedroom but quickly returned, her eyes wide. "We've had visitors. Come in the den." She led the way down the hall. Pointing to an open window, she added, "There, look at that!"

"Why honey, that window stays open most of the time."

"I know that, but it doesn't punch holes in the screen most of the time. Look for yourself and don't try to placate me. That screen had been unhooked and someone has climbed in—*tonight!* Look at the dirt on the casement and sill. I'm a better housekeeper than that."



Bart couldn't argue. She was right. "Anything missing?"

"Not that I can see, but did you take the Venturi light bill from the desk?"

"No."

"Neither did I, but it's gone."

"Do you think anybody would take such a chance for a mere light bill?"

"What chance! Our nearest neighbor is three hundred feet away, and we were there for three hours tonight. To make it still easier, Lisa was with us." Her brow furrowed. "The significance of the thing is that they did it at all. How would anybody know we had the bill?"

"I guess they saw me pick it up in front of the house. That may also explain their pointed interest in me as they left. I had the card in my hand as they backed out."

"It explains a lot, particularly if they want to avoid publicizing the Corbin name and the Venturi address. It's frightening. If they went to this extreme to recover the card, what'll they do if they find out what we're thinking. I'm scared."

"I'm not buoyantly gay myself." He sat down at the desk and reached for the phone directory. "One thing is for sure. I have to get off my duff and get my nose wet." He dailed the FBI, and getting a prompt connnection, gave the agent a detailed report. "That's correct. Oklahoma license 2-1174 . . . Good . . . Thank you."

Helen's eyes asked questions. Bart looked thoughtfully at the telephone. "Your hunch was right. They already had a lead on the car but not the license number and, of course, not the Stinson address." He stood up hesitantly. "Keep Lisa here. I'm going to do a little snooping."

Helen Stevens knew her husband. Her frightened eyes said, *Don't be a fool.* Her choked voice said, "Be careful."

Bart circled the west end of the house through the carport and stopped. The silence of the still night was unbroken. The expanse of lawn lay mottled by the light of a quarter moon, but beneath the larger trees, the blackness was impenetrable. Nothing moved. Keeping to the shadows, Bart crossed noiselessly to a point short of the Stinson house and again stopped.

A faint yellow light glowed through the curtains of the rear bedroom. The long play room, like the rest of the house, was totally dark. He cut over to the garage and peered through a rear window. The car was gone.

With an impulsive jerk, the

kitchen door flew open. Bart crouched behind a hedge as a large, heavy-set man stepped out into the semi-darkness. A flashlight clicked on, made a quick circular sweep, then went off. When the man went back inside, Bart waited a safe time, then crept over to the bedroom window. Although the light was still on, the curtains were drawn too securely to see into the room.

He moved on past the playroom door and turned the corner of the wing to the far side of the house. Neither light nor sound penetrated the dark walls. The wide lawn under the trees was as eerie as a graveyard.

Then a siege of barking violated the silence. Bart wheeled in time to see the white Impala sweep out of his circular drive and roar away in a haze of dust. Lisa tore after it in hot pursuit.

In an instant, Bart knew what was happening. He reacted automatically. His face stung with rage as he raced to the house, stopping only long enough to confirm his fears. The back door stood open—Helen was gone.

Bart didn't own a gun but he did own a pick handle. He grabbed it from the tool room and without caution made it back to the shadows behind the Stinson house in time to hear and see the last of a sharp conference. The car stood without lights on the side street, the engine running.

Outside the dark void of the open kitchen door, the big man had Helen's arms locked solidly behind her back. She struggled futilely to break free, a gag cruelly binding her mouth.

Lisa was giving all the trouble a small dog could give, but it wasn't much. Facing them were the small man and the blonde woman Bart had seen in the car. The man was speaking, completing orders in a high-pitched voice.

"Now listen, Ned. Lock this one in with the other one: Then go get that guy. He wasn't there but he will be and we can't gamble on them popping off. We'll be back before daylight." As the couple hustled to the car, Ned marshalled Helen inside and closed the door.

Lisa, sensing Bart's presence, came over and whimpered at his feet.

The final words had made it possible for Bart to control the impulse to rush in swinging. Their leaving completed the return of some semblance of common sense.

By crossing a state line with a kidnap victim, these people now faced a possible death sentence. They wouldn't have hesitated to shoot to kill, and at that range, three guns would have been considerably more effective than one pick handle. Now there was only one gun, and a plan began to form in Bart's mind. For a short time, at least, Ned would have his hands full.

Helen was no shrinking violet;

she was a vigorous, wiry woman and she was mad, and until he got her ankles bound, he stood a good chance of getting his teeth kicked out.

Yes, there was enough time if—and it was a big *if*. Fred had always kept an emergency key to the playroom door hanging on a nail in the garage. If it was still there, his plan might work. If not, the only thing left was to sweat out the arrival of the FBI. A glance at the radio light dial of his watch showed that it had been less than a half hour since his call.

In the garage, he ran his hand along the end of the work bench, his chest pounding. It was there! Still hoping for time, he rushed to the playroom door and inserted the key. The door opened noiselessly. He moved across the long room he knew so well and, feeling for the knob, softly opened the hall door. Sounds carried from the bedroom. Beneath the door, a line of light glowed. Everything else in the room was black.

Imitating the high-pitched voice of the small man, Bart screamed up the hall, "Hey, Ned! Who the hell left this play room door open!"

He stepped to the side of the doorway, and as the bedroom door crashed open, he raised the pick handle in both hands. The hall flooded with light, sending a broad beam across the playroom floor. Heavy feet stomped down the carpeted hall, and Ned came through the doorway, a forty-five automatic clamped in his huge fist.

When Bart came down with the pick handle, the impact sounded like a sledged steer at a packing plant, and the result was about the same. Ned sank to his knees, then sprawled out on his face.

Leaving the thug where he lay, Bart retrieved the gun and rushed to the bedroom. Helen and a pretty teen-aged brunette lay bound and gagged on the bed, their eyes wide. He released them and went back to see about Ned. Ned was breathing, but that was about all.

From the rear, powerful lights flooded through the plate-glass windows. A bull horn blared, "Ned Starkey, this is the FBI. We have Corbin and his wife. Come out with your hands up!"

With his own hands up and hoping they wouldn't shoot, Bart went to the open door, facing the glare of searchlights.

"Come in, gentlemen," he called. "Ned can't raise his hands."

After the routine was over, the Stevenses strolled tiredly back toward their home. Lisa swished through the trees as if they had just been on a picnic. Bart was the first to speak. "Are you all right?"

Helen's voice sounded small. "Yes, and Bart—thanks for doing what you did. You could've been killed. But the next time either you or Lisa find a strange light bill, leave it there. When I want my hair frosted, I'll go to the beauty shop."

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